Charmed
A dark cloud is gathering over the Sunshine State. . .
HURRICANE HEX
BASED ON THE HIT TV SERIES
CREATED BY CONSTANCE M. BURGE

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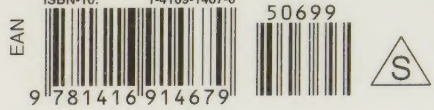

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"What does that mean for us?" Piper asked.

"That the problem is probably worse than a missing woman and her dog," Leo said bluntly.

Even Phoebe raised her eyes to stare at him questioningly.

"Your powers are too potent to risk using," Leo said, "except as a last resort. Margaret has to break the stall spell. Theoretically, Agnes and Poncho are anomalies that should be ejected from the rift before it closes."

"Then you'd be able to sense her," Piper stated.

"I'm not sure," Leo admitted. "The storm would resume its natural course and the flaws in reality would be repaired, but the area around this house would still be contaminated by distorted magic. That could confuse my senses and compromise my ability to find her quickly."

"But you could find her eventually," Piper said, looking to Leo for confirmation. "It might just take longer."

Leo nodded with a shrug, but the gestures only confirmed that he wasn't certain. Then his lips tightened, a warning of more bad news to come. "The back end of a hurricane is always worse than the leading edge. And the longer the eye is stalled, the greater the force building up behind it will be."

"And?" Piper prodded.

"If Margaret can't get the hurricane moving soon, Agnes and her dog won't be the only casualties," Leo said. "The back bands could flatten the house, killing us all."

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HURRICANE HEX

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Based on the hit TV series created by

Constance M. Burge

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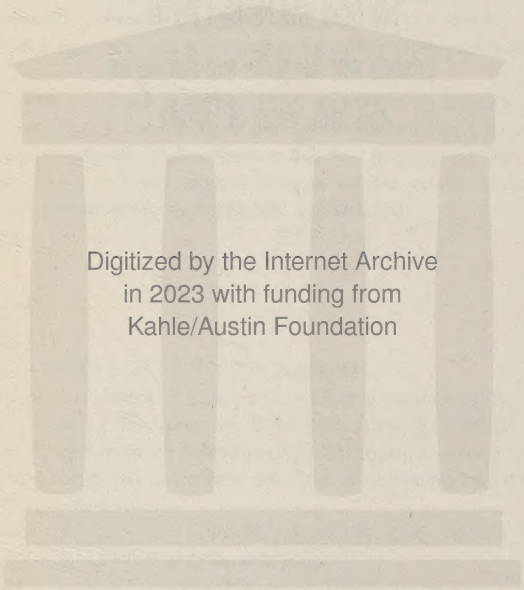
With affection and gratitude,
For Dove and Michael Porter,
Friends who keep the sun shining on
this little patch of Florida.



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Chapter One

"There's Phoebe," Piper said, pointing across the pool.

Paige raised her sunglasses and squinted past the sunbathers lounging around the Orlando hotel. The blinding glare of Florida's summer sun reflected off the white concrete and the shimmering blue water.

Phoebe paused under a coconut palm, slipped off her beige suit jacket, and draped it over her arm. She carried her laptop case, indicating she had come directly from the writers' conference. Pushing a tendril of damp, dark hair behind her ear, she scanned the patio around the pool.

"Phoebe!" Paige called out and waved, then turned toward Piper. "She looks a little wilted."

Phoebe's skirt and coral pink blouse had been fresh and wrinkle-free that morning. The fabrics had gone limp and wrinkly in the oppressive humidity outside the over-air-conditioned hotel.

"It's almost five o'clock and it's still over ninety degrees in the shade," Piper pointed out. Her tanned legs glistened with suntan oil. She took a sip of sweet tea and smiled under her wide-brimmed straw hat. "Should we feel guilty?"

"About the fact that Phoebe's been working and we've been shopping, sightseeing, and lounging around the pool for three days?" Paige considered the question for a split second. "I don't."

"Good. Neither do I," Piper admitted. "Besides, I think Phoebe loved every minute of her seminar."

"I'm sure of it," Paige said as Phoebe spotted them and started walking over to their lounge chairs.

As a favor to Elise Rothman, editor of the *Bay Mirror*—and her boss, Phoebe had agreed to conduct a seminar at the Annual Southeastern Writers' Conference. Elise's friend, Jane Shanley, was in charge of programming. When Jane couldn't find a syndicated columnist to run a journalism session, Elise had volunteered Phoebe's services. Phoebe had eagerly accepted, primarily to help aspiring writers who were interested in the dos and don'ts of writing an advice column, but partly because the conference was also paying her a small fee and covering her hotel and travel expenses.

"Well, in any case, the conference is over, and

now Phoebe can relax." Piper closed her paperback romance novel and dropped it into her beach bag.

Paige nodded, smiling. Elise had given Phoebe the whole week off so she could enjoy the Sunshine State before returning to California.

When they had heard about the conference, Paige and Piper had quickly decided that they needed a Florida vacation too. Although they couldn't avoid the demands of their magical destinies as the Charmed Ones—not that they wanted to—an occasional respite from vanquishing demons and protecting Innocents kept the Halliwell sisters' batteries charged and their senses fine-tuned. They both also had other, more mundane reasons for wanting to get away.

Piper hoped her absence would strengthen the bond between Wyatt and Leo. Although her husband was a doting dad who never shirked baby duty, Wyatt had recently developed a Mommy-only fixation. He fussed and cried whenever Leo tried to feed him, bathe him, or put him to bed. It was probably a normal phase, but Piper didn't want the troublesome behavior to become a habit. She figured if she weren't home for a few days, Wyatt would have to rely on Leo.

The Florida trip was a lucky break for Paige as well. Sharon Grant, her best friend from college, lived on the edge of a national forest ninety

miles north of Orlando. Although they had kept in touch, Paige hadn't seen Sharon for years. Two weeks ago Sharon's husband had called to invite her to visit. Paige had sensed Ben was worried about something, but when she asked him if something was wrong, he had clammed up. She'd accepted the invitation anyway, and figured she'd get to the bottom of it when she saw her friends in person.

"Welcome to our temporary life of semitropical leisure," Piper said as Phoebe sat down on the end of her lounge chair. "How did the last day go?"

"Did your novice advice columnists appreciate your expert writing advice?" Paige asked.

Phoebe had written three letters similar to those she received at the *Bay Mirror* and given copies to each of her seventeen students. For their final exam they had written responses. She had spent the last day of the seminar reading and critiquing the columns and going over the various techniques they could use for dispensing advice.

"Some did and some didn't. I was brutally honest." Phoebe set her laptop down and sighed. "I'm amazed at how little some people understand basic human nature, while others just seem to know the right thing to say and how to say it. Two of the ladies have real potential."

"So where's your Florida dreamboat?" Paige teased, changing the subject. Although Phoebe

hadn't objected when Paige and Piper asked to tag along, her initial reaction had been tinged with cautionary sarcasm.

"On the one hand, a Florida vacation wouldn't be any fun without my sisters," Phoebe had said. "On the other hand, if I don't meet a hot young wannabe writer with a golden tan, classic profile, and perfect teeth, I'll be very disappointed."

Paige and Piper had promised to make themselves scarce the instant Phoebe encountered a gorgeous hunk with literary ambitions.

"Still no eligible bachelors," Phoebe answered with a grin. "Apparently, young, good-looking, go-getter journalist types want to be hotshot investigative reporters, not advice columnists."

"What about Roger and Chuck?" Piper asked, referring to two men Phoebe had mentioned in passing. "Weren't they in your class?"

"Uh-huh." Phoebe nodded. "Roger collects Social Security and plans to write an advice column in his retirement-complex newsletter. Chuck thought an advice seminar would be a good place to meet women."

"Which it was," Paige pointed out.

Phoebe nodded. "Yes, fifteen attractive ladies between the ages of twenty-two and sixty-five signed up, but Chuck set his sights on the teacher."

"And this was unacceptable why?" Paige asked.

"I'm guessing Chuck wasn't young or tan with a classic profile and perfect teeth," Piper said.

"Actually, he was all of those things," Phoebe explained, "especially the young part. He'll be a fabulous catch after he graduates from high school and finishes college in seven or eight years."

"Chuck is fifteen?" Paige arched an eyebrow. "Did you let him down easy?"

"Not exactly." Phoebe shrugged. "His advice to my fictional elderly widow, 'Late in Life,' was that she'd be nuts to get involved with someone who was her age or older and might die any minute."

"Pragmatic and to the point, but definitely lacking in sensitivity," Paige observed.

"That's pretty much what I told Chuck," Phoebe said. "I also mentioned that he didn't have the life experience to address adult issues or relationships."

"Ouch!" Piper winced.

"Yeah. I crushed his hopes and his heart," Phoebe said matter-of-factly. "Anyone hungry?"

"Famished." Paige had picked at a salad earlier, but it had been too hot to think about eating outside in the Florida heat. "The hotel concierge recommended a restaurant down the street that makes a fantastic pina colada and features a steel band."

"Coconut and calypso!" Piper stood up. "I'm ready."

• • •

After speaking to Leo, Piper went down to the hotel gift shop. Paige and Phoebe weren't finished dressing, and she wanted to buy a cute toddler top she had seen earlier. Wyatt squealed with excitement whenever he saw a dinosaur on TV or in a book, and the shirt with the cartoon dino decal was too perfect to pass up—especially since Wyatt was apparently going through major Mommy withdrawal.

Piper found the shirt in Wyatt's size and then waited her turn at the cashier's counter. When the man in front of her picked up a newspaper, her gaze was drawn to the front page of the local paper, the Florida *Sun-Sentinel*. In vacation mode since getting on the plane, she had no idea what was happening in the world. The range of her curiosity narrowed when she saw a headline in large font bearing bad news.

George, a category three hurricane, was closing in on Florida. Piper felt a stab of fear pierce her chest. She had checked the weather reports four days earlier, before leaving San Francisco. The National Hurricane Center had predicted that the storm would follow a northerly route without making landfall.

"Looks like George will miss this area," the man said to the girl behind the counter.

"I sure hope so." The cashier gave him his change.

The anxiety that had gripped Piper when she

first realized they were going to Florida during hurricane season came flooding back. She studied a diagram on the front page of *The Miami Herald*. The graphic charted several possible paths George could take. A red line, depicting the updated and most likely course, cut straight across the southern end of the Florida peninsula. Piper breathed a bit easier. Orlando was in the middle of the state.

"Four hurricanes hit Florida a few years ago," the girl continued. "The second one blew half the roof off my house."

"We watched the coverage on TV," the man said. "Terrible, all that destruction. I'm glad I'm leaving tomorrow."

So am I, Piper thought. Sharon and Ben Grant lived ninety miles north, well out of harm's way.

After paying for the T-shirt, Piper met Phoebe and Paige at the hotel entrance. Despite the heat and humidity, they walked the two blocks to the Caribbean Cove.

Piper stopped abruptly when they walked in the front door. "This is a little gloomy, isn't it?"

The foyer was paneled in dark wood and dimly lit by brass lanterns. Saloon-like swinging doors led directly into a bar with four booths and a few tables. The décor was an intricately detailed replica of a sailing-ship deck, complete with mast, furled sails, cannon, and rigging. Tarnished swords, harpoons, a watch bell, portholes, buckets, and other eighteenth-century

nautical artifacts were scattered about. The room was almost as dark as the foyer, with storm clouds painted on the ceiling, and no windows. The only patrons were a young couple making out in the corner booth and three men who looked to be in their mid-seventies, sitting at the bar.

"Are we sure this is the right place?" Paige asked, wrinkling her nose.

"It's kind of cozy," Phoebe said. "In a dismal, extremely authentic kind of way."

"Too authentic, if you ask me," Piper said. The ship motif was impressive, but the subdued lighting was only ideal for young lovers who wanted privacy and old men who didn't want to be bothered. The room instilled a sense of the hardships colonial sailors had withstood, but Piper wasn't in the mood for depressing reality. She wanted the festive ambience of a tropical island paradise.

"There's no room in here for a steel band," Paige observed.

"The band plays on the patio," the bartender said. Wearing a white open-necked shirt with billowing sleeves, and a large gold hoop in his ear, he didn't quite pass muster as a pirate. He thumbed toward the back of the room. "Just turn left at the end of the bar."

One of the men at the bar swiveled his stool and smiled. "The minute you walk outside, you'll know exactly how the poor blokes that

manned these old ships felt when they finally anchored offshore."

"If they lived long enough to reach shore," another man added.

"Aye!" The third man nodded solemnly and raised his glass in salute.

"Now I'm intrigued," Phoebe said, leading the way.

Piper wasn't convinced until they stepped into the sunlight. The outside restaurant was connected to the bar by a wooden bridge that spanned a cascading waterfall flanked by gardens. The dining area was as light and cheerful as the boat bar was dreary. Calypso music played quietly in the background.

"This is an improvement," Paige said, pausing by the hostess stand.

That's an understatement, Piper thought as she glanced around.

The patio was two-tiered. A U-shaped bar on the upper level sported a thatched overhang. The bartender, who was wearing the tattered garb of a shipwrecked sailor, served exotic drinks in coconuts garnished with paper umbrellas and flowers. Several rattan tables and chairs sat among potted palms, and baskets of exotic plants hung from the lattice ceiling. The lower level surrounded both sides and the front of the raised center tier. Tables were set against a white railing that separated the dining area from lush fountains, stone pools, and gardens.

Parrots, lizards, and scavenger squirrels inhabited the screened tropical terrarium.

"Three for dinner?" A hostess dressed in a colorful Caribbean costume greeted them.

"Yes," Piper answered. "Do you have a table by the garden?"

"Right this way," the hostess said, picking up three menus and motioning for them to follow.

When they were seated, they ordered drinks and an appetizer platter.

"This is perfect," Paige said, smiling as she watched water splash over a natural rock fountain into a pool below. "Look! There's even fish!"

Phoebe leaned back with a contented sigh. "Teaching wannabe advice columnists the tricks of the trade for three days was fun, but I'm definitely ready for some serious R & R. And I'm glad you both came with me."

"Even if you didn't meet Mr. Wonderful?" Paige asked.

"Especially," Phoebe admitted. "I didn't really want a vacation romance. I just said that to tease you two."

"Speaking of men, how's Leo doing?" Paige asked as the waitress set their drinks on the table. Her pina colada came in a huge goblet with cherries and fresh pineapple.

"Has Wyatt settled down?" Phoebe said, eyeing her giant pink frozen drink. "This looks like a daiquiri for two."

"Apparently, Wyatt's not exactly cooperating,"

Piper replied, a pensive frown creasing her brow as she sipped her margarita.

Phoebe's brown eyes clouded with concern. "I thought Leo said everything was fine."

"He did—because he didn't want to spoil my vacation," Piper explained. "He finally told me this afternoon that Wyatt's been cranky and miserable ever since I left."

"That just doesn't make sense." Paige scowled. "Wyatt adores Leo. Maybe he's sick."

"Our pediatrician says he's fine," Piper said, sighing. "The doctor told Leo that some kids go through periods of insecurity and need Mommy more than usual."

"That's tough on Daddy," Phoebe said.

Piper nodded with a sad smile. "Good thing for Wyatt his daddy cares more about him than his own bruised feelings."

"I'll drink to that." Paige raised her glass with both hands. "Here's to superdad."

"To my fantastic husband," Piper said, and touched her glass to Paige's and Phoebe's.

"And a trusted Whitelighter," Phoebe finished. "At least we haven't needed Leo's professional services on this trip."

"That's right." Piper had been so busy being a tourist she had put demons and other Charmed predicaments out of her mind. "We haven't had any magical mishaps."

"Except when you knocked over a lamp and froze it before it hit the floor," Paige reminded her.

"I reacted purely on instinct," Piper insisted. "The hotel probably wouldn't have charged us for a broken lamp, so there wasn't any personal gain." She paused, then added, "Besides, you orbed back to the hotel from the mall."

"So I wouldn't be late," Paige said. "That was common courtesy, not personal gain."

"But how often do we get time off from being the Charmed Ones?" Phoebe gave each of her sisters a pointed look.

"Never," Paige replied. "So maybe the powers-that-be decided it was time. It's not like we haven't earned a real vacation."

"It's possible, I guess," Phoebe conceded, "but there's got to be a catch."

"There is," Piper said calmly. "Hurricane George is going to hit southern Florida late tomorrow night or the next day."

Paige and Phoebe stared at her.

Paige spoke first. "I thought George was way out to sea."

"It changed course," Piper said. She looked up as the waitress returned carrying an enormous plate heaped with an assortment of appetizers.

"We must not be in danger or you would have said something about George sooner," Paige said as she spooned sour cream over a helping of stuffed mushrooms and jalapeño poppers.

"Right now the storm is headed across the tip of the state." Piper put half a dozen boiled

shrimp on her plate. She hadn't realized she was stressed about the impending storm until she had started talking about it. "But if George changed course once, he could change course again."

"Yes, but that still wouldn't be a problem." Phoebe paused to swallow a bite of fried mozzarella. "Hurricane winds *rotate* at a hundred miles an hour, but they cover distance at a much slower rate."

"About twenty miles an hour, on average," Paige interjected, looking at Piper. "FYI, just in case you forgot."

"I didn't." Piper peeled a shrimp and dipped it in spicy cocktail sauce. When she had expressed her reservations about going to Florida during hurricane season, Paige had bombarded her with facts to convince her there was nothing to worry about. California earthquakes struck with no warning, but Floridians had time to evacuate or prepare for a hurricane.

"Were Sharon and Ben living in Florida that year when four storms hit?" Piper asked Paige.

"They moved down a few months later," Paige said. "After the hurricanes, so many people wanted to leave, Ben got some incredible deals on property."

"How is Ben's real estate business going?" Phoebe asked.

"Well enough that Sharon doesn't have to work," Paige said. "But—"

Phoebe glanced up as she registered Paige's hesitation. "But?"

Paige set down her fork. "I think there might be another kind of storm brewing at Ben and Sharon's."

"An emotional storm?" Piper piled her discarded shrimp tails on a paper napkin and scooped a few more shrimp onto her plate.

"I'm not sure," Paige said. "When Ben called to invite me for a visit, I got the feeling something was bothering him. But when I asked, he denied it."

"Maybe he'd just had a bad day at the office," Phoebe suggested, studying the appetizer platter and trying to decide which delicacy to try next. "Or maybe Sharon misses managing a restaurant and having a career."

"I doubt it," Piper said. "There's a huge difference between managing a business and owning one." She loved running P3, but she also had reliable managers to take over the nightclub's operations when she wanted to get away.

"Still—" Phoebe took the last few boiled shrimp. "Ben has a thriving business and probably spends a lot of time out and about with clients. Sharon is home alone with nothing to do but cook and clean."

Piper smiled. She could almost hear the gears clicking in Phoebe's head. Her sister had to identify the problem before she could offer sound advice.

"I'm sure we'll find out what's going on soon enough," Paige said with a resigned shrug. "I just didn't want you to be blindsided if all is not well in the land of Grant."

"That might be awkward," Piper said. "Phoebe and I have never even met Ben and Sharon."

"Don't worry," Paige said. "I seriously doubt it's a Power of Three problem."

"Shhh!" Phoebe hissed, eyes blazing.

"Not funny, Paige," Piper warned. The sisters were all too aware that even a passing reference to being Charmed might jinx their temporary danger-free flirtation with normalcy.

Chapter Two

Phoebe sat in the backseat of the rental car, watching the countryside roll by as the three sisters sped north on I-75. Paige was driving and Piper was navigating with the directions Ben had e-mailed Paige a few days earlier, so Phoebe could relax.

I wonder if I should respond to "Buried in Buckshot" or "Lost in Boston," Phoebe thought. Although she was officially on vacation now that the writers' conference was over, she wanted to get a jump on her next column. Two of the letters she was considering dealt with different aspects of a similar problem.

"Buried" faced an either/or dilemma. Her husband had turned down a better-paying job because he didn't want to move away from their friends and family. They had no children, and "Buried" had recently received an accredited college degree online. However, there were no corporate career opportunities for her

in the small Montana town of Buckshot.

"Lost" had given up a modest day-care business when her husband accepted a job in a large metropolitan area. His new position was lucrative but demanding, and he had less time to spend with her. "Lost" loved her husband, but she missed her friends and the casual pace of small-town living. She felt trapped in unhappy circumstances and couldn't think of a satisfactory solution.

Phoebe hadn't settled on a reasonable response to either woman, but she decided that using both letters would add an extra measure of depth to the column.

"We want to take the next exit, Paige," Piper said. "According to Ben's directions, we'll save time and miles by taking the back roads."

"Ah, the scenic route," Paige said as she flicked on the turn signal and steered into the right lane.

The whole drive has been scenic, Phoebe thought, *and much different from what I'd expected.* The north-central part of the state was less tropical than the Florida coasts. Stands of palmetto and masses of kudzu vine grew everywhere, but few palm trees graced the green horse pastures and landscaped lawns. Instead, pines, aspens, and oaks draped with Spanish moss lined the highway where human habitation and enterprise had not yet encroached.

"How did Sharon sound when you talked to her last night?" Piper asked Paige.

"Fine," Paige said, nodding slowly. "She can't wait to see me and meet my sisters."

Phoebe noted the uncertainty in Paige's tone and expression. Her sister was holding something back.

Piper caught it too. "Is there a silent 'but' on the end of that sentence?" she asked.

"No, it's just that—" Paige paused, collecting her thoughts. "Well, if Sharon and Ben are having trouble, she wouldn't want me to know."

Phoebe looked at Paige quizzically. "Why not? You're one of her best friends."

"That's why she wouldn't want me to know about any problems in her idyllic life," Paige replied.

Although Phoebe had the degree in psychology, she respected Paige's innate understanding of human nature. Not only could Paige usually detect a problem and isolate the cause, she was always driven to fix it. Her desire to help people was so strong she had pursued a career in social work before leaving to become a full-time good witch. Her do-gooder streak also explained why she had adapted so quickly to the hazardous responsibility of being a Charmed One.

"I don't understand," Phoebe said, perplexed.

"Sharon is really competitive and a total perfectionist," Paige explained, "which could have been catastrophic for two friends who were passionate about the same thing. We were

both very interested in painting back in college, which might've been disastrous for our friendship."

"Obviously, it wasn't disastrous," Piper observed. "You and Sharon are still friends."

"Only because I refused to compete with her," Paige said. "Not on any level—artistically, academically, or socially. And I never criticized her—about anything."

Odd, Phoebe thought. Paige had told Melody, their muse, that she had given up art because *she* was a perfectionist.

"Art isn't about perfection," Melody had countered. "It's about expression. The key is simply to love it."

Paige had been operating on the assumption that if she wasn't able to give her best to an endeavor, then it wasn't worthwhile. She'd stopped painting because she hadn't had time to practice her craft. After meeting her muse she'd realized that the act of creating was as fulfilling as finishing a canvas, and she had started to paint again.

Why had Sharon become a restaurant manager? Phoebe wondered. *What had caused her to give up on her artistic ambitions? Was it for the same reasons as Paige? Or had Sharon been unwilling to subject herself to the professional critique and rejection of gallery owners and buyers?*

"What happened when Sharon asked for your opinion, Paige?" Phoebe asked, trying to

get a sense of her sister's old friend. "Were you honest, or did you lie?"

"Sharon never asked," Paige said.

"Never?" Phoebe was skeptical. "Not about her art, what she was wearing, her hair, a term paper, anything?"

"Never," Paige confirmed.

Piper looked confused. "If Sharon doesn't confide in her best friends about her problems or ask their opinions, who does she talk to?"

"A psychologist? Or an advice columnist?" Phoebe leaned over to catch Paige's eye in the rearview mirror. "I'm available if you need me."

"Thanks," Paige said, smiling. "I probably will need advice and moral support from you and Piper."

"I meant if *Sharon* needs someone to talk to," Phoebe clarified.

"Oh, then I doubt your services will be required," Paige said. "If there's one thing Sharon dislikes more than a meddling friend, it's meddling strangers."

A half smile twitched the corner of Piper's mouth. "What are the chances Sharon and Ben are demons in disguise hatching a diabolical plot to take over the world?"

"None!" Paige laughed.

"Then I promise not to meddle," Piper said.

Phoebe recognized the real concern underlying Paige's warning. Paige was worried that Ben had called because he needed help with a

personal problem, and she didn't want to damage her friendship with Sharon by getting involved. And Phoebe's and Piper's efforts to help might be counterproductive, despite their good intentions.

"If Sharon wants my help, she can write me a letter," Phoebe joked, hoping to set Paige's mind at ease.

"Is that the turn up there?" Piper pointed toward a patch of sunlight in the dark foliage along the roadside.

"Where?" Paige peered out the windshield and eased off the gas.

They had turned off the two-lane highway onto a narrow country road a few miles back. An overhead canopy of oak branches filtered the sunlight, and gossamer streamers of green moss added to the eerie gloom. Trees, vines, palmetto, and ferns had overgrown the shoulders on both sides of the road, hiding the occasional dirt track that angled off into the Florida forest.

"On the left." Piper glanced at Ben's directions then looked up again. "That's it. Ben says to turn at the dirt road marked by three mailboxes, one of them yellow."

Paige overshot the dirt road, stopped the car, and backed up. She checked the names on the mailboxes before making the turn. "Grant, 3 Salamander Drive. This is the place."

Phoebe pressed her face against the window.

"When you said Ben and Sharon lived on three acres of secluded woodlands, I didn't picture swamp wilderness."

"I don't think this area qualifies as swamp," Paige said, turning onto the hard dirt drive.

"I think Paige is right. There are bogs in this area," Piper said. She held up several brochures for local attractions she had picked up at a rest stop along the way. "And sinkholes."

"What's the difference?" Phoebe asked.

"Swamps have more water than bogs," Paige answered. "This looks like pretty solid ground."

The vegetation flanking the dirt track wasn't as dense as the thickets along the paved road. Kudzu vines, which formed strangling nets over trees and bushes if left to grow unchecked, had been stripped away. Rays of sunshine and patches of purple, white, and yellow wildflowers brightened the shadows.

"The forest is beautiful," Phoebe said, "in a dark, creepy kind of way."

"There's the first house," Piper said, looking out the side window.

"Cute," Paige said, stealing a glance as she drove by.

The single-story home sat in a clearing dominated by a central copse of trees, ferns, and overgrown plants with huge leaves. Flower gardens, punctuated by large rocks and contained by low stone-and-mortar walls, surrounded the house. Flowering shrubs stood at brilliant pink and

lavender attention along the base of a wide front porch. A white-haired woman wearing jeans and a red and white checked shirt sat on the porch steps, watching them approach.

"Nosy neighbor?" Phoebe asked, grinning.

"Or just curious," Paige said. "There're only three houses on this street. Except for deliveries, there probably isn't much traffic."

"Ben and Sharon's place should be just ahead on the lef—look out!" Piper shouted as a red fox darted out of the woods and into the road.

Paige's heart lurched when she realized the car was going to run over it. She was thrown forward against her seat belt as she simultaneously hit the brakes and orbed the animal. The sparkling blur rematerialized into a frightened but uninjured red and black fox on the other side of the road.

"Did we hit it?" Piper opened one eye, afraid to look.

"No." Paige sat back, brushing her hair off her face. She stared into the fox's golden brown eyes until it turned and scampered into the trees. "Close call, though."

"Too close." Phoebe craned her neck to look out the back window. "I don't think that lady on the porch saw anything, but I'm not entirely sure. We'd better be more careful."

"If it's not too late already." Piper sounded dismayed.

"Killing that fox wasn't an option," Paige said.

She knew that revealing their powers and identities as witches could have disastrous consequences. However, since that was only a possibility—not a foregone, absolute conclusion—she couldn't sacrifice a life for the sole purpose of keeping a secret.

"Of course not, Paige. I would have saved it too." Phoebe cocked her head, listening. "I don't hear any hysterical screaming. I think we're in the clear."

"Unless that woman's on the phone alerting the neighborhood," Piper quipped.

Paige knew Piper was only kidding. Besides, the damage had been done, and they'd deal with whatever happened next.

Hopefully nobody saw a thing, Paige thought. She really didn't want to have to tell her supercompetitive old friend that she was one of the three most powerful witches of all time.

"Wow!" Phoebe exclaimed as the next house came into view. "Ben and Sharon aren't exactly roughing it out here."

The Grants' pale yellow two-story house was surrounded by pine, hickory, and sugar gums. The natural undergrowth had been cleared off the quarter acre around the building, but it was obvious that every tree possible had been spared during construction. Pine needles accented by clusters of ferns and wildflowers covered the ground instead of grass. A concrete driveway connected the dirt road to a two-car garage.

Potted plants, chairs, and low tables sat on a veranda that stretched across the front of the house and around the left side. White spindle-shaped columns supported the overhanging roof, and green shutters framed the windows. Shrubs planted along the base of the veranda were the only cultivated landscaping. The high-peaked roof boasted a satellite dish for TV and a brick chimney. Apparently, some winter nights were cold enough to warrant having a fireplace.

Ben and Sharon Grant rushed out the front door, waving and smiling as Paige pulled the car into the driveway and parked in front of the garage.

"They don't look freaked out," Piper muttered, smiling and waving back. "I guess their neighbor didn't see the fox light up the road."

"That's a relief," Paige muttered, unbuckling her seat belt. "Ben! Sharon! It's so good to see you," she exclaimed as she jumped out of the car.

The years had been more than kind to Ben, Paige noticed. He was six feet tall with wavy dark hair and arresting blue eyes. Casual tan slacks and a light blue short-sleeve shirt hung perfectly on his lean yet muscular frame. His handsome tanned face was unmarred by creases, except around his eyes when he smiled.

"Paige! You look great." Ben threw his arms around her and squeezed.

"What's your secret?" Sharon grinned as she

gave Paige a critical once-over. "If I had known California was so good for figures and complexions, I wouldn't have let Ben cart me all over the country!"

"Your figure and face are still perfect, Sharon," Ben said, slipping his arm around his wife's slim waist.

Sharon tensed and folded her arms, but she didn't pull away.

"Your husband doesn't lie," Phoebe said, stepping forward and extending her hand. "It looks like living in Florida agrees with you just fine, Sharon. I'm Phoebe."

Whether by accident or by design, Phoebe's warm smile diffused what may or may not have been an uncomfortable moment. But that wasn't Phoebe's only motive, Paige realized. She watched closely when her sister touched Sharon's hand. Phoebe did not flinch or blank out, indicating that she had not experienced some terrible premonition about the couple. Paige sighed with relief and studied Sharon as Piper introduced herself.

Sharon was as slim as she had been in college, and she glowed with a golden tan. She had brown eyes and natural sun-bleached highlights in her long blond hair. With her blue espadrilles, a floral print skirt, a white polo shirt, and designer sunglasses perched on her head, she was a walking advertisement for the beautifying benefits of her Florida lifestyle.

"Let's get you all inside and settled," Sharon said, ushering the sisters toward the front door. "I can't wait to hear what you've been up to lately, Paige."

"And I can't wait to tell you," Paige said, grinning through clenched teeth.

"I'm on pins and needles," Piper muttered with a curious glance at Paige.

On the drive up from Orlando, Paige had thought of a dozen different ways to explain why she had quit working at South Bay Social Services and what she was doing now. Every story she had come up with was weak, but better than the one story she couldn't tell: the truth.

"Does anyone else get the feeling things are a little tense between the Mr. and the Mrs.?" Piper asked as she set a stack of shirts and shorts in a dresser drawer. The three sisters were staying in one of three bedrooms on the second floor.

"Yes, but I don't want to assume anything." Phoebe hung her business suit in the closet.

"No flashes of the future when you shook hands with Sharon, huh?" Paige closed the clasps on her empty suitcase and shoved it under the bed.

"Nothing." Phoebe sat on the rollaway cot and bounced twice, testing it for comfort. "I think this mattress is firmer than the one on the bed."

"Nice try, but you got the short straw and

therefore you get to sleep on the rollaway," Piper said. She stepped between Phoebe and the queen-size bed she and Paige were sharing. "Paige and I will just have to suffer."

"You didn't get anything from Ben, either?" Paige asked Phoebe, changing the subject back to their hosts.

"No, sorry." Phoebe carried her toiletry bag into a large adjoining bathroom. The door to the hall was locked from the inside to give the guest room occupants exclusive access. Sharon had laid out shampoo, lotion, designer soap, and three sets of towels along the marble countertop next to the sink.

Piper walked into the sitting-room alcove. The view from the large bay window was limited to a section of dirt road, the veranda roof, and the trees beyond. She sat in one of the wing-back chairs on either side of a reading table, to wait while her sisters finished unpacking. A nearby floor lamp with adjustable dual lights would allow one person to read without disturbing anyone else in the room. A few inches from her feet sat a basket filled with several recent news, fashion, and lifestyle magazines for visiting insomniacs to peruse.

"But I definitely had the feeling Ben was anxious about something," Phoebe said as she stepped back into the bedroom.

"Something he couldn't talk about," Paige added.

"Because Sharon was either hovering or shooing him away," Piper finished.

Sharon had given them a quick tour of the house while Ben carried their bags inside. The country kitchen, formal dining room, and master bedroom suite on the first floor were bright and spacious, with doors that opened to the outside. Chic but comfortable sofas and chairs were arranged around a low table in front of a large stone fireplace in the living room. An upper level gallery overlooked the living room, and a rustic chandelier was suspended from the high vaulted ceiling. All the upstairs bedrooms opened onto the gallery hallway; Ben used one of the rooms as a home office, and Sharon had turned the third into an arts and crafts studio.

Earlier, when Paige had asked to see Sharon's recent work, Sharon had brushed off the request with an abrupt "later" and hustled everyone down the hall, away from the closed studio door. Paige had dismissed Sharon's behavior as "typical," assuming that her perfectionist friend didn't have anything she thought was good enough to show yet. Piper wondered if Sharon just didn't want to show Paige, her closest friend and artistic rival.

The tour of the house had ended in the guest bedroom. Ben, who had just brought the last of their bags upstairs, had asked if they needed anything else. Before they could answer, Sharon

had excused herself to make iced tea and insisted that Ben go with her to help.

But Sharon isn't jealous, Piper thought, propping her chin on her hand. In addition to the personality profile Paige had given them, Piper had studied couples at P3 for years. Sharon's self-assured confidence was genuine. Paige's friend truly wasn't worried about sharing her husband's attention or losing him to another woman.

"Sharon did hover, didn't she?" Paige mused aloud. "She doesn't want me talking to Ben—alone."

"That's what it seems like," Phoebe agreed. "But I'm not so sure."

"I agree with Phoebe, Paige," Piper said as she stood up. "And maybe Ben just called you because he thought you and Sharon should see each other again after all these years."

"That's possible, I suppose," Paige said hesitantly, then brightened. "But I have to talk to Ben to find out. It's a yes or no question. I'll only need a couple of minutes."

"Why are you looking at us like that?" Piper asked, catching the gleam in Paige's eye.

"She wants us to distract Sharon so she can corner Ben," Phoebe said.

"That's your mission. Iced tea anyone?" Paige said quickly, then turned and left the room before her sisters could protest.

Piper hung back while Phoebe emptied the rest

of her suitcase. "I don't mind plotting and being a busybody to save the world or an Innocent from evil, Phoebe, but this isn't a magical situation. No Charmed intervention required."

"I know, but it's important to Paige." Phoebe set two pairs of shoes in the closet and stowed her bag under the rollaway. "Let's just play this by ear. If we get a chance to help, fine. If not, we won't."

"Okay, fair enough," Piper said as she headed out the door. She had other things to worry about.

When Piper had called home that morning, Leo had tried to convince her that Wyatt was finally settling into a no-Mommy existence. Wyatt was still unhappy, but he wasn't crying all the time. The situation was far from perfect, but progress had been made. Although most parents had to deal with separation issues—the child's and their own—other parents didn't have to deal with temper tantrums and crying jags that might produce magical mayhem. So far Wyatt's powers had been limited to protection wards and the occasional animation of a picture or toy. Sooner or later that would change.

Piper and Phoebe found Sharon, Ben, and Paige on the stone patio at the back of the house. They sat at a round glass-topped table drinking iced tea and eating peanuts. A latticed ceiling provided a surprising amount of shade from the piercing sunlight that slipped through the trees.

A decorative wooden railing enclosed the patio, and petite pink roses climbed an arched wooden walk-through onto a small expanse of lawn. A variety of flowering plants completed the gracious garden ambience.

"We drink sweet tea by the gallon," Ben said, handing each sister a glass garnished with a slice of lemon. "But if this isn't to your liking, we've got lemonade in the fridge."

Piper and Phoebe both accepted the iced tea. Paige didn't realize she had just missed her chance to isolate Ben until Piper shot her an exasperated look.

Hoping to salvage the bungled opportunity, Paige quickly finished her tea and smiled at Ben. "Actually, lemonade sounds great. I'll have some of that now, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all." Ben grinned. "I have to pull the jalapeño poppers out of the oven in a minute anyway."

"I'll help." Paige stared to rise.

"Let Ben get it, Paige," Sharon immediately interjected. "We've got too much catching up to do to waste a minute. Are you still in social services? I don't imagine that pays much, but it's probably more secure than being a freelance artist."

Taken aback, Piper stared at Sharon. The woman seemed completely unaware that her comment could be taken as an insult. Piper didn't think Sharon had intended to put down

Paige, and apparently, Paige was used to her friend's blunt style and didn't take offense.

"That's true." Paige sat back down. "But you know I've never been motivated by money."

"Never," Phoebe said.

"Helping people get through hard times and solve tough problems is very rewarding," Paige said, "but I'm not doing social work anymore."

"Really?" Sharon looked puzzled. "But you must be doing something. You're not the type of person to sit around doing nothing."

Piper glanced through the kitchen window as she listened. She saw Ben make a face and drop something in the trash container. Moldy cheese? Sour milk?

"I'm, uh—in between jobs right now," Paige said.

"Are you temping?" Sharon asked.

"Not exactly." Paige paused. "That's actually not a bad idea."

It's a great idea, Piper thought. Paige would have a flexible schedule working as a temp, and she'd be able to contribute to the family coffers.

"Paige is a huge help around the house," Phoebe said. "Piper owns the nightclub P3 and has a baby, and I'm so busy with my newspaper column, we really need Paige to take the load off."

"Ah!" Sharon nodded. "Domestic duty."

"At the moment," Paige conceded.

Piper didn't envy Paige's plight. Her sister

couldn't tell Sharon that she was studying advanced witchcraft to hone her magical skills as a primary player in the battle between good and evil. But without an explanation, Sharon might think she had failed professionally or was floundering without direction. On the other hand, Sharon had quit working to stay home too.

"Do you ever get bored, Sharon?" Piper asked, turning the tables. "Or lonely out here by yourself all day?"

"Not really." Sharon raised her glass to take a sip. "I keep busy."

"Doing what?" Paige asked. She looked relieved to have the conversation shift away from her. "Are you painting?"

Ben returned just as Paige finished the question, carrying a tray loaded with a pitcher of lemonade, fresh glasses, paper napkins, hot poppers, and a bowl of sour cream. He set the tray on the table and cast a curious glance at his wife, intensely interested in hearing her answer.

"A little," Sharon said. "Are you?" Her tone was crisp with an edge of challenge.

"Yes, I am." Paige beamed, pleased that she was indulging in her creative passion again. "I've only been back at it a few months, but—"

"Yoo-hoo!" A woman called out from inside the house. "We're here!"

"Who's here?" Phoebe asked.

"The neighbors," Ben said with a tight but tolerant smile. "If we hadn't invited them to meet you, they would have come over anyway."

"Stop that," Sharon said, playfully cuffing her husband's arm. She looked back at the sisters. "You passed Margaret's house on your way in. This is Agnes Finney. She lives just around the next bend."

"Sorry we're late." A thin, elderly woman with curly white hair stepped through the sliding glass doors. She cradled a white toy poodle in her arms. "Poncho took forever finding a proper place to do his business."

"Darned if I know why, Agnes." The white-haired woman they had seen earlier followed Agnes onto the patio. "He's the only dog marking territory for miles around."

"You know Poncho is particular, Margaret." An annoyed pout puckered Agnes's mouth.

Piper struggled to suppress an amused smile. The two women were exact opposites in appearance and demeanor. Agnes was petite, demure, and soft-spoken. She wore a long-sleeve blouse with a ruffled collar, a flower print skirt, canvas tennis shoes, and eyeglasses on a gold chain around her neck. Margaret was taller and heavy-set with a gravelly voice that matched her gruff persona. It wasn't likely she had seen the foxy light show, Piper surmised. The brash, outspoken woman would definitely have said something.

"Yeah, well—" Margaret looked at the dog askance. "At least Poncho doesn't ram a car into the mailboxes every week, like Frank did."

"Frank was Agnes's husband," Sharon said.

"His eyesight had gotten quite bad before he died a couple of years ago," Agnes explained.

"Frank was practically blind," Ben said as he arranged the poppers and sour cream on the table and stashed the empty tray underneath it. "But he wouldn't admit it or give up driving to the Corner Post to meet the guys for coffee."

"No, he was a proud and stubborn man, Frank was." Agnes chuckled and put the small dog on the ground.

The poodle's curly hair was clipped short except for his ears, the end of his bobbed tail, and the top of his head. He immediately started barking at Phoebe.

Phoebe drew her feet up onto the rung of her chair. "I don't think he likes me."

"Poncho doesn't like anyone," Ben said.

"Not at first, anyway." Sharon shrugged.

"I'm so sorry, dear. This is hardly the way to welcome visitors." Agnes picked up the dog, and Poncho stopped yapping. "He won't bark when he gets to know you."

"How long will that take?" Paige asked with a wary glance at the poodle.

"A lot longer than it will to get to know me," Margaret said, and shook hands with each of the sisters as she introduced herself. "Margaret

Olsen, fifty-two, no kids, never married, retired schoolteacher, mostly fifth grade, got a pension."

"And made some very wise investments," Ben added.

Margaret pulled up a chair and poured herself a glass of lemonade. "If there's anything else you want to know, I'm not talking."

"She isn't kidding," Agnes said as she sat down with Poncho on her lap and lowered her voice. "Margaret can be very obstinate."

Margaret didn't seem to hear the insult.

Despite Margaret's brusque manner and Agnes's noisy dog, Piper took an instant liking to both women.

"Where's your plywood, Ben?" Margaret's glance swept the house and yard. "In the garage?"

"I don't need plywood, Margaret." Ben poured Agnes a glass of lemonade. "We have shutters."

"Those flimsy things?" Margaret laughed. "They'll blow right off in a category three."

"A category three?" Piper asked, alarmed.

"The green ones are decorative," Ben explained patiently. "We have roll-down storm shutters installed in the wooden valances above the windows. They're approved for winds up to one hundred and sixty miles per hour."

"Are you worried about the hurricane?" Piper frowned. "George isn't supposed to come anywhere near here."

"Charlie wasn't supposed to hit Punta Gorda, either," Agnes said, tightening her grip on Poncho. "But it did."

"Charlie was a picnic compared to Donna in 1960." The lines in Margaret's weathered face deepened as she absently swirled the pink liquid in her glass. "Donna was a strange storm. A very strange storm."

Piper caught Margaret's gaze and held it. "How strange?"

Chapter Three

Phoebe rested her chin on her palm and gave Margaret her full attention. She was as fascinated by the older woman as she was curious about Hurricane Donna.

Some people were born cantankerous, but Phoebe's instincts told her Margaret wasn't one of them. She thought the rough bluster might be a protective facade, shielding a vulnerable woman from hurt and harm. It would not surprise her to learn that Margaret's heart had been broken when she was very young and that she had never recovered enough to love another man. Her passion and her caring nature had instead been devoted to the children that passed through her classroom.

And now she's watching out for Sharon, Ben, and Agnes, Phoebe concluded.

"It all started back in the late 1880s," Margaret began.

Paige blinked. "Hurricane Donna started back then?"

"No, the story starts back then." Margaret fixed Paige with an intimidating teacher's stare.

Paige smiled, but Phoebe could feel her sister squirm under the scrutiny. Margaret's expression reminded her of her third-grade teacher. Nobody in her class had dared to breathe whenever Miss Newmark gave someone that look.

"Yellow fever struck a small community of folks that had settled near the St. John's River," Margaret continued.

"They called it St. Joseph's Colony," Agnes said. "It's part of Seminole County now."

Margaret kept talking as though Agnes hadn't interrupted. "Four members of one family died. The local priest had gone off to Tampa and died suddenly while there, so the family was buried without a proper service or sacred words—just simple wooden crosses to mark the graves."

Poncho whined.

"He did *not* understand that," Phoebe said, looking at Agnes. "Did he?"

"Goodness, no!" Agnes put the dog down again. Poncho dashed across the patio, paused to sniff a pot of white and pink impatiens, and then followed his nose onto the lawn.

Piper had no interest in the miniature canine. "How are those deaths connected to a hurricane that struck eighty years later?"

"I'm getting to that." Margaret set her glass aside and folded her hands. "The graves were

forgotten until a farmer bought and cleared the land in 1905. When Mr. Hawkins found them, he had the good sense to respect the right of the dead to rest in peace."

"Not everyone does, you know," Agnes said solemnly.

"They should." Sharon's expression was darkly serious.

Ben sighed, but he didn't say anything.

Phoebe couldn't tell if he was bothered by the story or by his wife's interest in the topic. She wondered if Paige had noticed too.

"The farmer planted his crops around the small cemetery," Margaret went on, "and when he died in 1939, his widow continued to honor the graves."

"But someone else didn't," Paige said, making a logical leap to that conclusion. "Who?"

"The Florida Highway Department." Margaret answered, her eyes narrowing. "The state bought the land for Interstate 4 in 1960. The surveyors told the government contractors that the graves were there, but the government didn't bother to remove them."

"They built the road over the graves," Sharon said. "Big mistake."

"Major," Margaret agreed. "Hurricane Donna hit the east coast of Florida on September tenth, shortly after they'd started dumping fill on the grave site. The storm had been on a course straight across the tip of the peninsula—"

"Just like George," Piper said, stiffening.

"Just like George," Margaret repeated, and leaned forward slightly. "Donna was a category four, the worst hurricane to hit in a hundred years. But that's not what was so strange."

Everyone watched Margaret, waiting.

"The storm took a sudden turn north." Margaret traced the hurricane's path on the table with her finger. "The eye passed right over the graves, leaving so much destruction that they couldn't work on the highway for months."

Paige frowned, puzzled. "I thought it was calm in the eye of a hurricane."

"It is, but the back side of a hurricane is a fury far more turbulent than the leading edge of the eye." Margaret picked up her lemonade and leaned back. "Hurricane Donna cut a diagonal path across the state to Ormond Beach on the Atlantic—following exactly the same route as the new interstate."

"Seriously?" Paige asked.

"That much is fact," Ben said. "The more relevant question is: Was the path of the hurricane a coincidence or did a bunch of dead people use the storm to get revenge for the desecration of their graves?"

"You think it was a coincidence." Paige posed the question as a statement of fact and looked at Ben.

"Don't you?" Ben asked Paige, expecting an affirmative answer.

Not necessarily, Phoebe thought in silent

response to the question. There was no such thing as coincidence for the Charmed Ones. When the Power of Three was needed to right a supernatural wrong, everything happened for a reason. *A solid but secret fact we have to keep to ourselves,* Phoebe reminded herself.

"But the strange occurrences don't end with Hurricane Donna, Paige," Sharon said. "The section of highway that covers the graves is called the I-4 dead zone."

"Why?" Paige asked.

Margaret ticked off the reasons on her fingers. "More traffic accidents than usual, static on radios, cell phones that don't work—to name a few."

"Some people have seen ghosts on that stretch of highway too," Sharon said in a matter-of-fact, conversational tone.

"Nonsense." Agnes waved the notion away. "There's no such thing as ghosts or vengeance storms or dead zones."

"I'm with you on that, Agnes," Ben said.

Phoebe saw Sharon clench her jaw. Clearly she gave credence to paranormal possibilities while Ben totally rejected the concept. Phoebe wasn't sure what to make of the bizarre hurricane-interstate-ghost tale. Stranger things had happened since her powers and identity as a witch had been restored, but not every urban legend was rooted in reality.

"It's a great story, but that's all it is," Ben stated flatly. "A story."

Margaret couldn't resist weighing in. "I wouldn't be too sure about that, Ben."

Phoebe didn't offer an opinion. An argument between skeptics and believers could never be settled definitively.

Piper changed the subject back to hurricanes before the argument over coincidence versus reality could ruin the afternoon. "What do you think the chances are that George will turn north and head toward here?"

Later that evening Piper sat perched on the edge of the living room sofa, flipping through the TV channels.

Outside, Ben was demonstrating his motorized storm shutters for Margaret. The aluminum covers rolled smoothly down tracks installed on both sides of each window and the sliding glass doors. During a storm he could operate the system from inside the house with a remote control.

Phoebe and Agnes were in the kitchen, helping Sharon clean up after a meal of grilled hamburgers, potato salad, raw vegetables with a spicy ranch dip, and chips.

"What are you looking for?" Paige asked as she sat down beside Piper on the sofa. She slipped off her sandals and tucked her feet underneath her.

"A weather report," Piper replied. She stopped changing channels when she found a hurricane-watch segment on a local station.

Although everyone agreed there was almost no chance George would impact Marion County, she wanted to track the storm's progress. Almost no chance was not the same as no chance.

"It'll be close, but not quite a category four when George makes landfall early tomorrow," the announcer was saying.

"Look at that," Piper said anxiously. She gestured toward the map displayed on the screen. "The course *has* changed."

Several projected storm paths were depicted. The newspaper chart Piper had seen in the hotel gift shop had plotted the most likely course with a red line across the end of the state continuing into the Gulf of Mexico. The television graphic had the red line angling north before it entered the Gulf.

"It's still headed toward the Gulf," Paige said with a quick glance at the screen. "But a not-quite-category-four doesn't sound good."

"Nope," Piper said, recalling their earlier discussion. "It doesn't."

Margaret, who was an expert on every aspect of Hurricane Donna—the facts as well as the folklore—had told them all about the intensity of the category four storm. And it had not sounded pleasant. With thirteen-foot storm surges and one-hundred-and-fifty-mile-an-hour winds, Donna had washed away bridges and demolished buildings in the Florida Keys. The Grants' house had been built after Frances and

Jeanne had swept through central Florida, and Ben was confident the house could withstand a major storm. But his theory had never been tested, and Piper wasn't eager to become a guinea pig.

After several seconds of silence Paige finally added, "Sharon said most of these storms lose power as they move over land."

"Most," Piper repeated, "but not all. Donna's hurricane-force winds lasted all the way up the East Coast, and into New England."

"Donna is the *only* hurricane on record to do that," Paige countered. She had been paying attention to Margaret too. "How come you're so worried about *this* storm? Is there something special about it the *three* of us should know?"

Piper looked up sharply, catching the subtle Charmed reference. She was as troubled by her uncharacteristic anxiety as Paige was, but the source of her fears wasn't magical. "No, nothing like that."

Piper wasn't thrilled that facing death and fighting demons was destined to be part of her normal existence, but she had accepted it and coped with it for years without falling apart. A hurricane should seem almost inconsequential by comparison.

Except that the storm is a force of nature, not something evil I can vanquish or control, she thought.

The instant that realization flashed through

Piper's mind, she understood why her nerves were so frayed. She wasn't a control freak, but she liked having a firm grip on any circumstance that affected her. If someone called in sick at P3, she could find a replacement or work the shift herself. When a demon threatened, she could devise a way to vanquish it and fight back—on her own terms.

But I can't control a hurricane, Piper thought. She had to ride it out like everyone else, without the benefits of magic, taking whatever the winds blew their way.

"I just don't like the idea of a big, bad storm having the upper hand," Piper said lightheartedly in an effort to set her sister's—and her own—mind at ease.

"I'm not wild about it myself," Paige said. "But we'll be prepared—just in case."

"Yes, we will." Piper smiled. They couldn't stop the storm if it altered its course and headed toward them, but they could prepare themselves as much as possible.

"The best way to prevent being hit by a hurricane is to be ready for it," Margaret had told them. "Works just like insurance. If you have it, you don't need it."

Taking unnecessary precautions made more sense to Piper than gambling that the worst wouldn't happen.

Poncho suddenly bolted into the living room and jumped onto the sofa between Paige and

Piper. He barked once at each of them, then flopped down on his stomach. Agnes and Phoebe came into the room a second later to retrieve him.

"Come on, Poncho. Time to go." Agnes picked up the poodle and giggled when he licked her face. Margaret walked in and rolled her eyes at the dog.

"I'm going to walk Agnes home," Phoebe said. "I could use some exercise after eating all that food. We're taking the path through the woods so Poncho can exercise his nose."

"He loves the trails, but I don't like to walk through the woods alone," Agnes said. "If I fell, it might be days before anyone found me."

"Oh, please, Agnes," Margaret scoffed. "I check on you every day. So does Ben." Having set the record straight, she looked at Piper. "I'll be ready to leave at ten tomorrow morning. You drive."

"Sure," Piper said, nodding. She was still mystified as to how she had been elected to go shopping for hurricane supplies with Margaret while Phoebe and Paige stayed behind to help Sharon, Ben, and Agnes batten down the hatches.

Phoebe and Agnes let Poncho lead the way through the woods. The scents that clung to plants and rocks along the path piqued his canine curiosity. Agnes had to call him back

whenever he strayed off the trail, which was often.

"I didn't realize Florida had such beautiful forests," Phoebe said. She carefully held up a prickly vine and stood aside to let the elderly woman pass under it.

"Most people think Florida is just beaches, palm trees, and theme parks," Agnes said, and chuckled. "Probably because they never venture far from the beaches, palm trees, or theme parks."

"Probably not," Phoebe agreed with a grin. "They don't know what they're missing."

The pungent odors of damp earth and decaying vegetation hung heavy in the still, humid air. Ferns and oddly shaped red, brown, and white toadstools grew in a natural compost of rotting organic debris. Palmettos with fanned fronds hugged tall pines and oaks twined with thick poison ivy. Small lizards and toads fled from the aggressive Poncho, scurrying to safety under rocks and roots.

"It's too bad you weren't here to see the dogwoods in bloom," Agnes said to Phoebe with a wistful sigh. "They look like cotton clouds before they leaf out."

"Sounds lovely." Phoebe bent down to pull a clump of Spanish moss off a dead branch. "Why do they call this Spanish—"

Agnes gasped. "Drop that."

"This?" Phoebe dropped the soft lichen, but

not before something attacked her hand. The stinging sensation quickly spread across her skin. "Ouch!"

"Oh, my." Agnes touched her fingers to her mouth as she looked around. She left the path suddenly, scanning the woods as she wove a wandering route through the trees. Dry leaves crunched and twigs snapped under his paws as Poncho bounded after her.

Phoebe desperately tried to shake the invisible burning off her skin.

Agnes stopped next to a thick natural hammock of ferns and waved. "Over here, Phoebe!"

Amazed by the old woman's alacrity and take-charge response, Phoebe rushed over. The stinging pain was so intense she didn't argue when Agnes took her hand and plunged it into a squishy patch of bog.

"The mud will help until we get to my house," Agnes explained. "Soap and water will do the rest."

"Thanks," Phoebe said as the stinging began to abate. "I feel like such a fool, but I had no idea moss could be so dangerous!"

"It's not the moss," Agnes said, stopping to call Poncho as they returned to the path. "It's red bugs. You asked why it's called Spanish moss."

"Yes," Phoebe said, stepping over a large root growing across the trail.

"Well." Agnes's pale brown eyes twinkled. "When the Spaniards first got here, they gathered

the moss to make sleeping pallets. What they—and you—didn't know is that the moss is infested with tiny little red bugs you can't see. You can bet they only tried sleeping on that moss once."

"Oh, cringe!" Phoebe shuddered at the thought of being covered by the micromonsters.

"That's where the saying 'Don't let the bedbugs bite' came from," Agnes said. "And that's why it's called Spanish moss."

"What an interesting story," Phoebe said, glancing at the mud drying on her hand. "Although I could have done without the hands-on demonstration."

"At least that story is based on fact—not foolishness." Agnes looked vexed. "Like angry ghosts haunting a highway."

"You don't believe ghosts had anything to do with Hurricane Donna changing course," Phoebe said.

"No, and I think Ben's more than a bit upset because Sharon believes it. Sharon believes all of Margaret's nonsense," Agnes said, shaking her head. "Those two are always cooking up something. Ben's just too much of a gentleman to make a fuss."

"Really?" Phoebe cocked an eyebrow, wondering if she had just stumbled onto the reason Ben had summoned Paige to his home. Ben and Sharon had been at obvious odds about whether Margaret's ghost story might be true. . . .

"These woods are full of scary things," Agnes

went on. "Real things, like swamps and bogs, snakes and poison plants, sinkholes. I heard a new one opened up recently on a construction site a few miles from here and swallowed a truck."

"Swallowed it whole?" Phoebe asked.

"That's what I heard," Agnes said. Her grin faded as she looked back at the trail they'd been following. "Where's Poncho?"

"I thought he was right behind us," Phoebe said, glancing around uneasily. She and Agnes had been so engrossed in their conversation they had lost track of the poodle.

"Poncho!" Agnes shouted, her voice cracking with strain. "Poncho! Where are you?"

"Agnes, I'm sure he's all right." Phoebe wasn't sure, but she wanted to keep the old woman calm. She peered into the woods, looking for a patch of white against the brown and green foliage. "He probably just chased a squirrel and got a little disoriented."

"Or something ate him," Agnes said. "Poncho always comes when I call. Poncho!"

"There are animals out here that would eat a dog?" Phoebe asked nervously.

"If there's water, there are alligators," Agnes said with a brisk nod. "They snatch dogs right off docks sometimes. A stream runs through the woods not far from here, and Gus Wilson shoots one in the swamp behind his place every couple of months."

"Alligators." Phoebe hadn't realized she was putting herself at risk for a close encounter with a hungry reptile when she had volunteered to walk Agnes home.

"Cats have to worry more about the coyotes," Agnes continued. "But a pack will go after a dog if they're hungry enough. Then there are bears—"

Alligators, coyotes, and bears! Phoebe thought, swallowing hard. *What's next, lions?*

"Poncho! Come on, boy!" Phoebe yelled, cupping her hands around her mouth. She thought she saw a bank of palmetto fronds bend, as though something was rustling through the plants. "I wonder what that is."

"Do you see him? Where?" Agnes asked, wringing her hands.

"I'm not sure. Wait here." Phoebe hurried forward, her heart pounding. She wanted to find the dog alive, but she dreaded stumbling onto a predator in pursuit of its prey.

She heard panting and felt a rush of hope when a dog whined.

"Poncho?" Phoebe parted the fronds.

The small poodle was crouched on a bed of flattened ferns, his eyes wide and frantic. He cowered when she held out her hand.

Phoebe had read somewhere that dogs didn't sweat. They panted when they were hot, overexerted, or afraid. Poncho's heavy panting and agitated state gave her pause. Animals were more

sensitive than humans to changes in air pressure and other conditions, which alerted them to impending disasters.

"Come on, Poncho." Phoebe didn't shout back to Agnes for fear of sending the dog into a panicked flight. Instead she tried to coax him out gently. "It's okay, boy. Come on out of there."

The dog hesitated, then crawled forward.

Still wary, Phoebe reached out to let Poncho sniff her hand. The instant she touched his muzzle, she was thrust into a tempestuous vision.

Howling winds bent trees and ripped green leaves off limbs, sending them into an airborne frenzy. Sheets of rain battered the ground, carving trenches for runoff water that pooled into ponds and enlarged swamps that were filled with alligators and snakes. A red bird feeder hanging on a low branch shattered as a large tree slowly fell over, crushing a glass and metal sunroom . . .

Phoebe clutched the dog's collar as the vision abruptly ended.

Hurricane George was going to hit here. And soon.

Chapter Four

Paige slipped out of the large bed, taking care not to jostle the bedsprings and wake Piper. She had been lying awake since going to bed half an hour before. Her internal clock had not adjusted to East Coast time yet, and neither had her stomach. It was midnight in Florida, which meant it was snack time in California. She hoped Sharon kept a sinful assortment of munchies in the kitchen, preferably chocolate.

Pausing by the bedside, Paige fumbled in the dark for her robe and listened to her sisters' steady breathing. They both slept soundly, Phoebe in spite of the too-soft rollaway mattress and Piper in spite of the storm vision Phoebe had seen when she had found Poncho. The Grants and the neighbor ladies had already decided to make hurricane preparations, so they could take comfort in the fact that every precaution would be taken to ensure safety. *And without us having to sound an alarm we can't explain,*

Paige thought as she tiptoed out the door on bare feet.

Paige crept down the dark hall with her hand on the gallery railing so she wouldn't trip. She stopped near the top of the stairs and inched forward until her toes found the edge of the top stair. But instead of going downstairs, she glanced back toward the studio at the far end of the hallway.

The house was as silent as it was dark. Sharon and Ben were asleep in the master bedroom, directly underneath the guest room, on the opposite side of the house from the kitchen. Sharon wouldn't mind Paige raiding their pantry at midnight, but she would be angry if she caught someone snooping around her studio.

That is, if she finds out, Paige rationalized. No one would know if she took a quick peek. . . .

Concern over her friend's well-being overcame Paige's qualms about invading Sharon's privacy. The tension between Sharon and Ben was acute, but difficult to define beyond a disagreement over the existence of paranormal phenomena. An artist's thoughts and emotions were often reflected in her work, and Paige couldn't overlook anything that might provide a helpful clue.

Paige retraced her footsteps back down the hall toward the studio, using the wall as a guide. The studio door was unlocked. She eased inside, closed the door, and ran her hand over the wall,

feeling for the light switch. She felt a rush of curious anticipation as she flipped on the light. Sharon's college paintings had shown great talent and potential. She had a realistic style and an eye for elegant simplicity. Of the many canvases Sharon had finished in school, Paige's favorite was an oil painting of a single daisy and loose petals lying on a wooden table next to a vase filled with daisies. Titled *One Too Many*, the piece had won an honorable mention at a prestigious local art fair.

Now, as Paige looked around, she knew why her old friend hadn't wanted to show her the studio.

The white canvas sitting on the easel was still wrapped in cellophane. More packaged white canvases leaned against a cabinet. Untouched brushes, unopened tubes of paint, a clean palette, and other neglected supplies lay on a built-in countertop, gathering dust.

Sharon hadn't been ashamed to show her recent work, Paige realized with surprise and disappointment. Sharon hadn't painted anything.

Not a dab or a stroke, Paige thought, turning off the light and closing the door as she left. *Why not?*

The studio had been set up and equipped by an artist with serious intent. Ben's thriving real estate business had made it possible for Sharon to concentrate on her art without worrying

about money. And as much as she liked housekeeping, gardening, and trying new recipes, Paige knew that homemaking could never replace Sharon's artistic passion. It didn't make sense that she would create the perfect creative environment and then abandon her craft completely.

But it looks like that's exactly what she did, Paige thought. She crept back down the hall to the stairs and held on to the banister as she descended, feeling for each step with her toes until she reached the hardwood floor below. The boards were hewn of rare river-bottom pine and fitted with such precision they didn't make a sound as she padded through the living room.

Paige turned on the kitchen lights as she walked through the arched doorway, grateful that she didn't have to worry about a cover story if anyone caught her checking out the pantry. That's where hungry people went to forage for food in modern society. After a long day, quick thinking under pressure was more than her tired brain could handle at this hour. Her waning mental energies were locked on the Ben and Sharon puzzle. The unanswered questions nagged her as she poured a glass of lemonade.

Ben wasn't the type of man to resent his wife's career or feel threatened by her success. He would encourage Sharon to paint, but he wouldn't belittle her apparent preference for domesticity, either. The unused studio might be

a symptom of their mysterious problem, but Paige didn't think it was the cause.

Setting her glass on the center island, Paige opened the pantry and glanced over the shelves. Her choices were limited, and she settled for cashews over trail mix or after-dinner mints. She pulled the lid off the can, left it on the pantry shelf, and popped several salted nuts into her mouth as she returned to the center island. She slipped onto a stool and washed the cashews down with pink lemonade, deep in thought.

Paige studied the kitchen, noting that Sharon's artistic abilities were evident in the Southern country décor. Potted herbs, gourmet utensils, and cookbooks were neatly arranged on the counters, bay windowsill, and built-in shelves. The simple pastel blue curtain matched the dish towels and pot holders. No dirty dishes or pots had been left in the sink, and the uncluttered countertops gleamed. Piper had kept the Manor kitchen just as orderly before Wyatt was born. Now there was baby stuff everywhere.

Paige straightened, stricken with sudden insight. Were Ben and Sharon stressed out about starting a family? They had talked about having children before they were married. Maybe one of them had had a change of heart, or perhaps they were arguing about timing?

Shortly after Paige had moved into the Manor, Piper and Leo had begun fighting about having a baby. Piper thought their Charmed

existence was too dangerous, but Leo was convinced their powerful magic could protect a child. Paige had borrowed a mechanical baby from South Bay Social Services and put it in Leo's care. When a demon's stray energy ball destroyed the fake kid, Leo agreed that bringing a baby into their world was too risky. Of course, once they knew Piper was expecting, that point became moot.

Paige realized that all her conjecture about Sharon and Ben was pointless as well. Until she talked to Ben, she was just grasping at possibilities.

Once Paige's hunger was satisfied, fatigue settled in. She rinsed her glass, then grabbed the half-full can of cashews and walked back to the pantry. When she reached for the plastic lid, it flipped out of her hand and fell onto the floor.

"Clumsy," Paige mumbled as the disk rolled under the bottom shelf. Kneeling to retrieve it, she bent over to look under the shelf before committing her hand to the dark recesses of the pantry. She was startled to find a velvet bag dangling from a drawstring, which was secured to the underside of the shelf with a thumbtack. Curious, Paige removed the bag.

On closer inspection, Paige realized that the bag was a talisman. A leather thong was tied around it, holding feathers and a garlic clove in place. Despite all Sharon's talk of revenge from the grave, Paige didn't believe she was trying to ward off vampires.

But she's warding off something, Paige thought. *With folk magic.*

Tacking the charm back under the shelf, Paige returned to the guest room plagued by more disturbing possibilities than she had considered before. Apparently, Sharon was cooking up more than dinner in her kitchen. Since she obviously believed the I-4 ghost story was plausible, it wasn't far-fetched to think Sharon had developed a dependence on protective charms. Was that why Ben was so troubled? It would certainly explain why he was reluctant to discuss the matter.

The injection of magic into the equation was even more troubling for Paige. Perhaps she and her sisters weren't on a Charmed-free holiday after all.

When Piper was certain Paige had fallen asleep, she eased out of the bed. She had been awake when Paige left an hour earlier, probably to find some midnight munchies. Piper was restless too and wanted a cup of tea to help her sleep, but she hadn't felt like talking, to Paige in particular. Her sister's pragmatic attitude about the impending hurricane jangled rather than calmed her nerves.

No situation—natural or magical—had been simple since the Halliwell sisters had discovered they were witches.

Besides, Paige was preoccupied with the still

unconfirmed problem between Sharon and Ben, and Piper didn't want to discuss their hosts' marital difficulties. She was worried about Wyatt. Maybe talking to Leo would ease her mind about both problems—the storm and her son.

Piper removed a flashlight from her backpack, but she didn't turn it on until she reached the top of the stairs. Once downstairs she left the house through the patio door and paused in the arched walk-through between the flat stone and grass.

A chorus of cicadas erased the silence, and a mental image of the large insects made Piper shudder. She remembered that Agnes had warned Phoebe that the forest was home to several unsavory species of predators. Piper needed a secluded location to insure that no one saw Leo orb in, but the dark woods were out of the question, even with a flashlight. Instead she headed down the driveway to the dirt road and chose a spot halfway between the Grants' and Margaret Olsen's house.

"Leo," Piper said in a loud whisper. Although it was only ten thirty on the West Coast, Leo was probably sleeping since he was on Wyatt's schedule. She hated waking him, but she needed the wisdom and assurance only her Whitelighter husband could give. "Leo!"

Leo arrived in a shower of sparkling light, bleary-eyed and holding a sobbing Wyatt. Piper immediately raised her arms to take the boy.

"He hasn't stopped crying since I put him down two hours ago," Leo said, handing Wyatt to his mother. "I've tried everything."

"I'm sure you have." Piper kissed Wyatt's tear-stained face and hushed him. "I'm sorry, Leo. I honestly thought he'd get over this if you two were left alone for a few days."

"I know," Leo said with an understanding smile. "I tried another bottle, a warm bath, a story—even TV. Nothing worked."

"You're tense, and he's reacting to it." Piper felt the baby relax against her shoulder. She cupped his head with her hand and rocked from side to side as he nodded off.

"That's probably part of it," Leo agreed. "Is he asleep?"

Piper nodded with a sheepish shrug, hoping Leo didn't take it personally. "What's the other part?"

"I can't explain that you'll be back in a few days," Leo said. "Until Wyatt saw you just now, he didn't know that you weren't gone for good."

"That makes sense," Piper said, frowning. "So what do we do?"

"I'll take him home and hope that seeing you relieves his anxiety." Leo gently touched Wyatt's hair. "Otherwise the next few days are going to continue to be tough."

Piper knew they had to proceed as planned. No mother could be with her child every minute, especially a magical mom who was on

call to fight demons 24-7. Wyatt had to learn to cope without her.

"Actually, it could be longer than a few days before I get home," Piper said. "Something's come up."

Leo frowned. "Something evil?"

"Bad, but not evil." Piper carefully handed the sleeping baby back to Leo. "According to Phoebe, Hurricane George is heading this way. It should hit the day after tomorrow if it continues moving at its current rate of speed."

"Really?" Leo looked surprised. "I heard the storm had angled north, but no one reported the shift was this drastic."

Piper arched an inquiring eyebrow.

"I've been tracking it on The Weather Channel," Leo explained.

"Phoebe got her information from the neighbor's dog," Piper said. "But we can't tell Ben and Sharon that, so when the course change is finally apparent, it might be too late to evacuate."

"You don't want to wait too long," Leo said, shifting Wyatt into a more comfortable position. The baby was too exhausted to notice. "The highways will be clogged with traffic. It's better to ride it out than to get stuck on the road. One of my charges lived down here when Donna hit in 1960."

Even though Piper knew Leo had been recruited as a Whitelighter following his death in World War II, it still jolted her when he

recalled events that occurred long before she was born.

"What happened?" Piper asked.

"Betty wouldn't leave her cats," Leo said. "She stayed, but Donna took a radical turn eastward and barely missed her."

"Leo, is George a fluke or an I-4 ghost revenge encore?" Piper asked.

Her husband looked surprised. "You know about the desecration of the interstate graves?"

Piper nodded. "One of the neighbors seems to be an expert on Florida fact and folklore. Is there any truth to the story?"

"It's never been proven," Leo said, "but it's certainly possible. Florida is a treasure trove of bizarre legends, although most of them can be explained."

"Such as what, and how?" Piper tried to hide her concern. Most legends were based on fact, and the Charmed Ones' survival often depended on knowing what to expect.

"A devil's doorway, for instance." Leo patted Wyatt's back and swayed as he talked. "Circular patches of barren ground that some say are cursed. No plants grow in the soil, no insects inhabit the soil, and anything left overnight on the soil disappears."

"And the explanation?" Piper asked.

"A lack of nitrogen and concentrations of sodium have been known to prevent plant growth in circular patterns," Leo said. "There's

no evidence that anything ever vanished overnight—not mysteriously, anyway."

"That's actually comforting to know," Piper admitted.

"And a lot of times people mistake swamp gas for UFO sightings," Leo added. "But the unpredictable effects of major storms on magic are not a myth, so be careful."

Piper jerked backward, stunned. "I didn't know storms could affect magic."

"Only catastrophic storms, such as hurricanes, monsoons, and tornadoes," Leo clarified. "A severe storm can enhance magic, diminish it, make it go haywire, or not affect it at all. Don't cast any spells or mix any potions, and you'll be fine."

"No spells?" Piper blinked.

"Not a good idea." Leo kissed her quickly. "I'd better get this little guy to bed."

Piper stood rooted to the dirt road after Leo orbed out. Since casting a spell to minimize the danger or inconvenience of the storm could be classified as personal gain, she hadn't planned on using magic to get through the ordeal. It hadn't occurred to her that magic might *increase* the already significant risks of a category four hurricane.

Piper glanced upward at a scattering of stars visible between tree branches. Was one boring, uneventful vacation too much to ask for?

Chapter Five

"That was an awesome breakfast, Sharon," Paige said. She leaned back and patted her stomach.

Coffee and toast were her usual morning fare. She rarely wanted to waste study time cooking, and her trim waistline wouldn't stay trim if she indulged her cravings for sugar, fat, and starch too often. Today Paige's healthy diet was a casualty of the irresistible aromas that were wafting from Sharon's kitchen when she had come downstairs. She had binged on bacon, scrambled eggs, biscuits, and juice.

"I'll say," Piper said, and blotted her mouth with her cloth napkin. "Do you two eat like this all the time?"

"We both have serious appetites," Ben said, smiling.

"And you both look fantastic!" Phoebe exclaimed. "How do you stay so fit?"

"Family secret," Sharon said with a sly wink.

"Bottle it," Paige said. "You'll make a fortune."

"Don't give her any ideas." Ben's tone was sharper than the discussion warranted, but Sharon ignored the barbed comment.

A clue? Paige wondered. Did Sharon want to start a dietary supplement business? Was Ben against it? That didn't compute, and Paige reminded herself to be patient. She was determined to find out what was up with her friends before the end of the day.

"Chalk it up to good genes," Ben said lightly, smiling to cover his disapproval.

"Very good genes." Piper placed her napkin on the table, then looked up, suddenly anxious. "What time is it?

Ben checked his watch. "Nine fifty. If you leave now, you won't be late."

"Heaven forbid." Piper stood up and pushed her chair in. "I do not want to go shopping with an annoyed Margaret."

"Smart girl," Ben said.

Paige thought he was just teasing, but Sharon jumped to Margaret's defense.

"I know Margaret can be overbearing and gruff," Sharon said, "but she doesn't mean anything by it. She just can't stop being a teacher."

"The teacher thing is actually a plus," Piper said, letting diplomacy overrule her tendency to be blunt. "I'm looking forward to hearing more of Margaret's colorful stories."

Paige refused to feel guilty because Piper was stuck on Margaret detail. She had come to

Florida to visit Sharon and Ben, and she hoped to make a breakthrough with one of them while they secured the house to weather the coming storm. Agnes had specifically asked Phoebe to bring in her flowerpots and patio furniture, and Phoebe had agreed to batten down whatever she could at the elderly woman's home. Ben would do the heavier work at both neighbors' homes later. Piper had been delegated through the process of elimination to go with Margaret to buy supplies.

"Do you want a ride to Agnes's house?" Piper asked Phoebe.

"After that breakfast, she'd better walk," Paige needled Phoebe, hoping to ease the strained atmosphere.

"I'll walk, but I'm taking the road," Phoebe said. "No more hiking in the woods with the bears and alligators for me."

"I've never seen a bear," Ben said. "Or an alligator."

"That doesn't mean they aren't there." Phoebe picked up her plate.

"Don't worry about the dishes, Phoebe," Sharon said. "I'll take care of them."

"And I'll help," Paige said. "We can work and catch up at the same time."

Since isolating Ben was proving to be difficult, Paige hoped Sharon would let down her guard and open up if they had some one-on-one time. There was a lot more to discuss now than

the Grants' personal problems. Piper had called Leo late last night to check on Wyatt, and Leo had warned her that major storms could affect magic. Although there was a good chance nothing would happen, he had strongly advised the Charmed Ones against using their powers. Sharon's talisman wasn't terribly potent, but Paige had learned not to tempt fate. The magical version of Murphy's Law was a potential killer.

"Don't let Margaret talk you out of getting these things." Sharon handed Piper a list. "We don't have to subsist on hot dogs and beans just because there's a hurricane."

"And a glass of cabernet eases the stress of watching shingles blow off the roof," Ben said.

"Just remind Margaret how much she likes my crab dip," Sharon added.

"Crab dip and cabernet. Consider it done." Piper stuffed Sharon's list into her jeans pocket and followed Phoebe out the front door.

"I've got a few calls to make." Ben rose and kissed Sharon's cheek. "I'll be down soon to help out."

"Take your time," Sharon said as she started tackling the stack of dirty plates.

"I thought he was taking the day off," Paige said as she gathered the silverware and followed Sharon into the kitchen. Ben had closed his office and given his staff the day off to shop for supplies and take care of their homes.

"He did," Sharon said. "Everyone backed up

the office computer files yesterday, but nothing stops a hotshot wheeler and dealer from wheeling and dealing—not even a hurricane."

"Good thing you installed those automatic storm shutters," Paige said. "They'll save a lot of time."

Sharon nodded. "We'll need every minute today. There's a lot to do. Boy did you guys pick a great weekend to come visit!"

Paige laughed and went back into the dining room to collect the empty coffee cups. She knew she had to guide the conversation carefully. Sharon wouldn't talk about her marriage or her magical dabbling if she thought Paige was prying.

"Ben seems a little on edge," Paige said on her third trip back from the dining room with the serving dishes.

"He gets that way when there's a big sale pending," Sharon said as she rinsed a plate and put it in the dishwasher.

"I guess that would make someone pretty tense," Paige said. She eyed the salt and pepper shakers, which were nearly empty. "Do you want me to fill these?"

"Yes, thanks," Sharon said. "I keep the salt and pepper in the pantry."

Perfect! Paige thought as she walked across the kitchen. She had made no progress on the personal problem front, but the talisman was about to become their next topic.

Paige set the pepper shaker on a pantry shelf. She held on to the salt shaker, removed the cap, and deliberately dropped it. Then, getting down on her hands and knees to retrieve it, she "found" the charm tacked under the shelf.

"Sharon!" Paige exclaimed. "There's something weird under here."

"What?" Sharon looked back, her eyes widening when she saw Paige on the floor. "Don't touch it."

"Don't worry." Paige sat back on her heels, holding her palms out toward the shelf to indicate that she was keeping her distance. She'd come back for the charm later, when no one was looking, but she needed to know more about it before she attempted to neutralize and destroy it.

"What is it?" Paige asked.

"A natural pest repellent," Sharon said.

Also known as a talisman, Paige thought. *What are you trying to ward off?*

"A few pinches of red pepper, salt, and borax," Sharon continued. "To keep mice and bugs out of the pantry."

"Oh," Paige said. Talismans were usually constructed and empowered to ward off evil, but she saw no reason the concept couldn't be applied to rodents and insects scavenging for food. "Does it work?"

"Yes, believe it or not." Sharon said. She hesitated, waiting for a response.

"We could use one of those in our kitchen," Paige said, picking up the cap to the shaker and getting to her feet. "Did you buy it somewhere around here?"

"I made it." Sharon turned back to the dishes in the sink. She seemed relieved.

Probably because I didn't make fun of her, Paige thought. However, she doubted that Sharon had discovered a natural no-kill remedy for mice on her own. The feather-and-herb pest control talisman was the product of an interest in folk magic.

"Don't tell me you found the instructions on the Internet," Paige said, continuing to fish for clues as she refilled the salt and pepper shakers.

A Web search for folk remedies would find dozens of Wiccan, mystical herb, and folk medicine sites. Paige had checked them all during her early research of the craft. Most sites had little to offer genuine practitioners. People with real knowledge and the ability to manipulate elemental magic didn't advertise the fact or make crucial details available online.

"Not hardly." Sharon laughed.

"A book?" Paige closed the pantry and set the shakers on the center island.

"Nobody publishes real folk mag—" Sharon caught herself. "Medicine in books."

So Phoebe tells me, Paige thought. When Phoebe had gone back to college, she'd rewritten a love spell published in a novelty book. Three other students had used the spell to turn three

animals into men, who retained their animal instincts and traits. The story had convinced Paige that it was imperative to keep real magic beyond the reach of wannabe amateurs. Sharon had either accidentally stumbled on a charm that worked, or she had an irresponsible mentor.

"You figured it out yourself? How did you know what to use?" Paige asked, trying to look impressed. "Most people don't have a hidden stock of bird feathers lying around."

"The arts are passed from one person to another—" Sharon stopped speaking abruptly, realizing she had said too much.

Paige couldn't let the subject drop. A great amount of folk medicine was effective for sound, scientific reasons. Certain combinations of natural ingredients produced a specific desired result, and twenty-five percent of manufactured pharmaceuticals still used substances derived from flowers, roots, and bark. Folk medicine had been developed through trial and error over thousands of years, beginning in ancient Egypt and China. The recipes were handed down to each new generation through an oral tradition. Even associated rituals sometimes had a practical or psychological benefit. Medicinal remedies based on science wouldn't be affected by the storm.

Some folk spells, however, used captured free magic as a catalyst, and a true witch was not necessary to make them work. Even without the hurricane threat, seemingly innocent potions

and incantations could backfire—with dire consequences. If Sharon was using more of this primitive magic around the house, Paige needed to know.

"I hope you know what you're doing." Paige said. She tried to probe without pushing, relying on humor to diffuse Sharon's defenses. "In the movies, anyone who fools around with occult stuff always regrets it."

"We're not in a movie, Paige," Sharon retorted. She closed the dishwasher and took a box of plastic freezer bags out of a drawer.

"Okay, I'm probably overreacting, but—" Paige stopped talking and shrugged, hoping she looked uncomfortable and apologetic. "What if something does go wrong? Are there more of those things in the house?"

"It's just a few feathers and things everyone has in the kitchen, Paige." Sharon's voice tightened with annoyed condescension, and her eyes flashed. "You're getting upset over something you know nothing about."

Know nothing about? Paige controlled the urge to correct her. She could hardly explain that she was one of the most powerful witches in the world and knew more about magic than Sharon could even imagine, so she had no choice but to smile and back off. When Sharon's competitive sense of superiority kicked in, no one could reason with her. *But sometimes keeping a secret identity a secret is a real bummer.*

"You're right. I'm just being silly." Paige said, backing off. She watched as Sharon filled a gallon-size freezer bag two-thirds full of water. She sealed and placed it in a square storage container.

Sharon caught Paige's curious stare and smiled. "Block ice. It'll take about twenty-four hours to freeze."

"Don't they sell ice down here?" Paige asked, puzzled.

"Yes, and the whole state is probably sold out or will be soon." Sharon carried the container to the refrigerator and opened the freezer door. The frozen food was crammed to one side to make room for the homemade ice containers. "As Margaret says, 'Why buy it if you can make it?'"

"She's got a point." Paige didn't offer to help. She still had to determine how much folk magic had been used in the house. She wasn't going to get anything else out of Sharon, but she hoped Ben knew something useful and might spill it. If not, she and her sisters would be searching for primitive charms and reversing folk spells instead of sleeping that night.

Paige hadn't even mentioned the feathered charm to Piper and Phoebe yet. First she wanted to know its purpose and the extent of Sharon's involvement with the folk arts.

"Since you've got things under control here, is there something else I can do?" Paige asked.

"Do your laundry," Sharon suggested. "You don't want to run out of clean clothes if the power's out for a few days."

"I didn't think of that," Paige said. She and her sisters had accumulated a mountain of dirty clothes over the previous few days.

Sharon opened a trash bag sitting by the garage door. It was full of empty two-liter plastic soda bottles.

"Still recycling, I see," Paige said. Sharon had kept a plastic bag for soda cans in their room during college. She would have a fit if she found a recyclable container in the trash.

"These are for water," Sharon explained. "The well runs on an electric pump. No power, no water." She set half a dozen soda bottles and a bag of caps on the counter.

Getting ready for a hurricane was more work than Paige had realized. Sharon and her neighbors were on top of things, but none of the preparations would help if the storm turned a bit of loose magic into mystical mayhem.

Before going upstairs to collect the laundry, Paige went looking for Ben. She found him testing the storm shutters in the master bedroom.

"Have you heard a weather update?" Ben asked when Paige walked in.

The TV in the living room was tuned to The Weather Channel, and Paige had caught a report as she walked through. George had shifted northward again, perhaps enough to convince

those who weren't in Phoebe's precognitive loop to take the threat seriously.

"The storm is definitely turning north," Paige said. "There's a good chance it'll swing toward us."

"I really thought we were in the clear." Ben sighed. He ran his hand over his hair and cupped the back of his neck as he absorbed the information. "But I guess we have to prepare for the worst."

Paige was anxious to avert the potentially catastrophic mix of magic and Mother Nature, so she got right to the point. "Did you know Sharon has an anti-mouse charm thingy in the pantry?"

"Another one?" Ben lowered the shutter remote, shaking his head. He was irritated but not shocked at the reference to a talisman. "I must have missed it on my last sweep, or Sharon made a new one since yesterday morning.

"And you swept the house for pest control charms because . . . ?" Paige tried to look bewildered.

"Because Sharon believes they work, and I do not," Ben said flatly. He walked over to the bedroom door and closed it. He obviously didn't want his wife to overhear their conversation.

"Is that why you called me?" Paige asked, sitting in a chair by the window.

"Yeah," Ben replied. He sank onto the bed. "But I thought you'd think I was nuts."

"I don't think you're nuts," Paige said. "I'm

just not sure I understand the problem."

Ben hesitated, as though weighing the risks of confiding in her. His desire for a sympathetic ear won out. "It started because Sharon had a hard time adjusting to the isolation out here. The stress got worse when she stopped working."

"That's understandable," Paige said. "She was surrounded by people all the time at the restaurant, and you're gone a lot."

"I do spend a lot of time on the job," Ben agreed, nodding. "A few months ago Margaret taught Sharon to make an herbal tea to settle her nerves. The calming effects were amazing."

So Margaret's the mentor, Paige thought.

"Then I got into some poison ivy a little while afterward, and Margaret made a poultice that smelled awful, but it stopped the itching." Ben shrugged. "I thought her home remedies were part accidental science and part placebo effect. Either way, it all seemed harmless enough."

"But it turned out it wasn't?" Paige asked, hiding her alarm. Were Sharon and Margaret conjuring something more powerful than magical first aid and bug-be-gone?

"No," Ben said, turning the remote over and over in his hand. "First Sharon started growing her own herbs. That was okay, but then she began collecting stuff in the woods—roots, berries, bark, that kind of thing. And now once a month she and Margaret go to a Chinese market in Tampa that specializes in rare spices and herbs."

And other occult makings, I bet, Paige thought. One of the Charmed Ones' main sources of ingredients was a Chinese shop. Certain new-age and organic food outlets also stocked spell supplies, many of which had nonmagical uses. A few things they had to catch or collect and process themselves.

"Why does that upset you so much?" Paige asked. Sharon believed in the primitive magic she practiced. She wasn't worried about consequences because she didn't know that she could lose control of the supernatural forces she unleashed. Ben's concern was puzzling because he was a skeptic.

"Because she's not using this stuff in casseroles. She's making medicine and charm thingies. She believes this folk nonsense can cure anything, from memory loss to weight gain." Ben exhaled, clearly frustrated. "She put a sliver of bath soap under the sheets because my feet were cramping at night."

That was an old wives' remedy Paige had heard about before, one that shouldn't work but did. When she was in junior high, an elderly neighbor had told her father, who was suffering from some minor aches and pains, to try putting a used bar of soap in his bed. Her dad had taken the advice and never questioned the inexplicable success of the experiment.

"My foot cramps stopped," Ben went on, "but

I had just started taking a potassium supplement. That was Agnes's idea."

"Agnes didn't buy the soap cure, huh?" Paige smiled.

Ben smiled too. "Agnes thinks Margaret and Sharon's 'voodoo shenanigans'"—he raised his hands and wiggled his fingers while quoting the old woman—"are poppycock."

"That's pretty much the same way Agnes feels about ghosts and cursed interstates," Paige said.

"Agnes is old and a little frail, but she's no fool. Sharon, on the other hand, is convinced the soap solved the problem." Ben let out a short, derisive laugh. "Okay, so that's a small thing, but her beliefs encompass everything. I'm pretty sure she finds a way to add her snake oil vitality tonic to my food."

"She feeds you snake oil?" Paige asked.

"No, but she's always putting roots and seeds in a cloth bag, beating the whole thing to a pulp with a rock, and then steeping the bag in boiling water. And this stuff is supposed to keep us healthy." Ben grimaced. "Sharon thought showing me the process would eliminate my objections to taking the stuff. It didn't."

"What does Margaret say?" Paige asked.

"She tells me not to worry," Ben said, rolling his eyes. "And that everyone gets carried away when something new grabs their interest."

Paige thought that assessment was basically

sound. It just didn't extend far enough, given the circumstances. People in the thrall of cult leaders had to be forcibly deprogrammed to break free of the controlling influence. A severe emotional shock sometimes had the same deprogramming effect. However, Sharon was most likely hooked on her *own* perceived power to manipulate her surroundings with folk craft, which wasn't good. That belief would be harder to shatter than a Svengali bond.

"I'm sure Margaret didn't mean to create a problem," Ben added hastily. "She couldn't talk about her hobby with Agnes since Agnes thinks it's insane, and she was probably ecstatic when Sharon jumped right on the bandwagon. To be honest, I think Margaret's enthusiasm has grown right along with Sharon's."

"One feeding off the other," Paige said. When they shared a dorm room, she and Sharon had discovered that the urge to paint was contagious, that active creativity generated more creativity.

"Now Sharon wants to learn how to read tarot so she can plan our every move," Ben said. He sighed. "This occult business is completely out of control, Paige. But Sharon won't discuss it—and it's wrecking our marriage."

"Maybe I can talk to her," Paige said. She realized it probably wouldn't do any good, though. Ben's account proved that Sharon hadn't changed much over the years. She still wasn't

open to questions or criticism about her actions, not even from the people who cared about her most. However, that wasn't Paige's primary problem.

"I hope she'll listen to you," Ben said. "These folk cures could be dangerous."

Yes, Paige thought, *but not for the reasons you think.*

"What do you do with the charms you find?" Paige asked.

"I toss them in the trash," Ben said, standing up. "I took all the bags to the dump yesterday. I didn't want them sitting around stinking up the garage, just in case the storm strands us here for a few days."

"Speaking of trash," Paige said as she followed him out the door, "what are the chances you missed some of those charms on your last sweep?"

Phoebe stood outside the sunroom at the back of Agnes Finney's quaint brick cottage, staring at the red bird feeder she had seen in her vision. *Except right now it's still attached to a big tree, which is rooted in the ground where it belongs,* Phoebe thought. Tomorrow the tree would topple and crush the metal and glass room behind her.

Phoebe propped open the screen door and picked up a pot of red geraniums. She walked inside and paused to take in the room. Bold floral print cushions adorned two wicker chairs

and a settee grouped around a wicker coffee table. The colors in the artificial floral arrangement on the table matched the cushions perfectly. Framed photographs and knickknacks sat on a wicker bookcase-cabinet piece that stood against the house wall.

Phoebe glanced out the window at the massive oak. The trunk was easily three feet wide. She couldn't imagine a wind being strong enough to uproot and push it over, but unless by some chance Hurricane George missed them, the tree was going to fall. *And everything in this room will be smashed,* Phoebe thought, *unless I do something about it.*

Phoebe stepped through the sliding glass doors and into the small dining area just as Agnes walked in from the living room. Poncho trotted happily by her side, but he stopped, planted his four feet, and barked when he saw Phoebe.

"That's enough, Poncho," Agnes said sternly. "It's just Phoebe." The dog quieted to a growl, and Agnes dropped a stack of towels on the dining room table. "Phoebe, you can leave the plants in the sunroom, dear."

"That's probably not a good idea, Agnes," Phoebe said, setting the pot on the kitchen counter. At least she didn't have to worry that Agnes or the dog might be hurt when the tree fell; they were staying at the Grants' house for the duration of the storm, as was Margaret. "The sunroom is mostly

windows and metal framework. If the glass breaks, your furniture will be ruined."

"You're right, of course." Agnes sighed. "Frank always brought the furniture in, even though we never lost a window."

"There's a first time for everything," Phoebe said.

Agnes smiled. "Chances are we'll just get some of George's outlying rain and wind, nothing worse than a tropical storm. I didn't want to put you to too much trouble."

"It's no trouble," Phoebe assured her. Until the weather reports reflected the hurricane's altered course, she couldn't tell Agnes that George was definitely coming their way. "I'll feel better if your things are as safe as possible."

"That's very sweet of you. Would you mind getting my coolers from the garage first?" Agnes asked. "There are two on the workbench."

"Sure, I'll be right back," Phoebe said. She located the coolers and set one on the kitchen floor. When she returned with the second, Agnes was lining the first with large beach towels. "What are you doing that for?"

"Another of Frank's ideas that worked beautifully. Don't ask me why, but the towels keep the ice frozen longer. Right before I leave, I'll put all my refrigerated food in these coolers on ice and wrap it all in the towels. Everything will stay cold for four or five days," Agnes explained.

"Wow!" Phoebe set down the second cooler. "I'm impressed."

"Frank was very smart," Agnes said, smiling. "Even if he was a stubborn old coot."

"You miss him, don't you?" Phoebe sympathized with the elderly widow. She tried not to dwell on it, but she still had an ache in her heart for Cole Turner, the lost love of her life. She probably always would.

"I miss him dreadfully, especially during a storm." Agnes opened the second cooler. "Frank would always make sure we had plenty of batteries for the radio and flashlights. The whole time the power was out, we'd listen to the local news, play gin rummy, and eat crackers and cheese."

"You have some wonderful memories." Phoebe unfolded a towel and placed it in the cooler.

"Oh, yes. And I almost always won at cards. He'd get so mad." Agnes glanced at Phoebe with a sparkle in her eye. "You just wait 'til we break out the dominoes. I play a mean game of nines, and Margaret hates to lose worse than Frank!"

Phoebe laughed. "I've never played dominoes."

"You'll learn, but be warned. We're cutthroat players, the bunch of us." Agnes punctuated the statement with a quick nod, then grinned. "You should really stop worrying, Phoebe. Hurricanes can be fun."

"Fun?" Phoebe looked at Agnes skeptically. The old woman radiated anticipation.

"Cooking on the grill, playing games with friends, watching the wind blow . . ." A wistful smile flitted across Agnes's wrinkled face. "We can't change the weather, so we might as well sit back, relax, and enjoy the opportunity to do nothing without feeling guilty about it."

"Thanks, Agnes," Phoebe said warmly. "You have no idea how much better that makes me feel." She wasn't kidding. She hadn't realized how stressed out she was until Agnes relieved the tension with her cheerful attitude and comforting words.

"That's what Frank always told me," Agnes whispered.

"He was stubborn and wise, then," Phoebe said as she stepped back into the garage.

Phoebe found an empty cardboard box and went back to the sunroom to pack Agnes's trinkets. She put the heavier items in the bottom of the box, beginning with a large conch shell and several paperweights that entombed a starfish, a seahorse, a white sand dollar, and a sunflower. There were several photographs of Agnes and Frank at various stages of their lives, each one taken with a different dog. They had owned several dogs over the years but apparently had had no children. Frank appeared in every picture except one, which featured Agnes and the incorrigible poodle.

"That Poncho is a nasty beast, Frank," Phoebe said as she reached for the picture, "but Agnes loves—"

Suddenly a vision grabbed Phoebe with staggering force. Her perceptions were yanked from the present into a vortex of howling winds and swirling debris.

Agnes stood in the calm at the center of the tempest, holding Poncho, looking around . . . frantic and lost in the mist. Then she and the dog were gone, vanishing as though blinked out of existence. . . .

When the vision abruptly released her, Phoebe was shaking uncontrollably. The picture slipped from her hand and crashed onto the terrazzo floor.

Why was Agnes wandering around outside in a hurricane? And how could she just disappear? The questions flashed through Phoebe's mind, but the answers were irrelevant. The events in the vision would not happen. She would not allow Agnes or the dog to step outside the Grants' house until Hurricane George had passed over. *No way, no how,* Phoebe vowed, as she stooped to pick up the broken glass.

"A volcano?" Piper glanced at Margaret, then snapped her focus back to the road. The ex-schoolteacher was quick to point out any flaws in her driving skills. "In Florida?"

"I take it I'm not boring you, yet," Margaret said, the hint of a smile playing on her lips.

"Not at all," Piper said. She actually enjoyed the woman's tales of mythical Florida. Margaret was fascinated by the local lore, but she was not an unquestioning believer. She seemed to recognize that historical events became distorted with each subsequent telling and the passing of time. She didn't hesitate to debunk those legends with scientific explanations, but she was also open to the idea that some inexplicable phenomena might be supernatural. Piper said, "Please, go on."

"Watch for a restaurant called Mary's Kitchen on the right," Margaret said. "The turnoff for the store is just beyond it."

Piper nodded, keeping both hands on the steering wheel.

"For a hundred years people reported seeing smoke rising out of the Wakulla Swamp in the northwest part of the state." Margaret recited the story with the ease of someone who had told it many times. "Some say sailors could see it out in the Gulf of Mexico. The smoke stopped after an earthquake in the late 1880s."

"You have earthquakes in Florida, too?" Piper asked, incredulous. That this would surprise her struck her as funny, given the range of horrific and bizarre things she had seen over the past few years. Plus, Paige had been so positive that Florida had hurricanes, but not earthquakes—and certainly not volcanoes. *I'll have to remember to bring that up with her when I get back!* she thought.

Margaret kept talking, giving Piper the impression she hadn't heard the question.

"Folks have come up with a number of explanations for the smoke," Margaret went on. "A moonshine still, a pirates' stronghold, black magic—but the volcano theory is the most popular."

"Why?" Piper asked in a normal voice, testing Margaret's hearing.

Margaret turned toward her with a puzzled frown. "Did you say something?"

Almost—but not completely—deaf, Piper deduced. Margaret was so adept at covering up her hearing loss, Piper hadn't noticed it before.

"I just wondered why the volcano theory is the most popular," Piper said, noting that Margaret watched closely as she spoke. *Is she reading my lips? Why hasn't she gotten a hearing aid? Is it a matter of pride?*

"Over the last hundred years a few explorers have claimed they found a crater," Margaret said, then shrugged. "And in the 1970s one old guy swore he found a blackened pit way back in the swamp. Said there were burned rocks all around it for a hundred yards or more. He's been dead for twenty-five years now, and nobody else has found anything except a few molten rocks."

"Molten?" Piper paused until Margaret glanced her way. Now that she was aware of Margaret's hearing problem, she realized that

the woman probably always tried to watch whoever was speaking. "How did molten rocks get into a swamp?"

"The source is still unknown," Margaret said. "But the geologists that examined them were certain they hadn't melted in a volcano."

"So there's no truth to the story?" Piper saw the sign for Mary's Kitchen ahead, waited for a break in traffic, and steered into the right lane.

"That's hard to say. The Wakulla is a mean swamp, filled with black water and scattered hammocks, mosquitoes, and poisonous snakes." Margaret smiled, then continued, "And glowing balls of green light that chase people."

"Swamp gas, right?" Piper flipped on her turn signal. Swampy environments were full of methane gas, which was produced by decaying matter. The combination of methane, water, and other undetermined factors sometimes created physical effects and optical illusions.

"Could be swamp gas, but who knows?" Margaret laughed. "Sometimes when I can't sleep, I walk around my gardens. Last night I thought I saw a ghost on our road!"

That was no ghost, Piper thought. *That was my husband!*

"Probably swamp gas," Piper said as she turned into the parking lot in front of the store.

"I'd rather believe that than admit I'm seeing things. Or that I finally need glasses." Margaret frowned, speaking more to herself than to Piper

when she took a pad and pen from her bag to make a note. "I must remember to get fresh extracts for my vitamin elixirs . . ."

Margaret's eyesight might be fine, but her hearing certainly isn't, Piper thought. *And home remedies won't help.* She had to say something—who knew how long Margaret would try to use folk magic to stay healthy before seeking real medical help?

"I don't think vitamins can save eyesight or improve hearing," Piper added, risking a heated denial or a lecture.

"Of course not, but they have other health benefits. I'm never sick," Margaret explained. "Over five years and not even a sniffle. I use a salve to prevent hearing loss."

Piper wasn't sure how to respond. She just nodded and kept her eyes peeled for a parking spot.

"It's an old folk remedy: ginseng and rabbit fur mixed with beeswax and bacon fat . . ." Margaret suddenly realized that the recipe must sound ridiculous. When she caught Piper's incredulous expression, she tried to cover with a joke. "I tried chanting over chicken bones before I buried them at the fork in the road under a full moon, and sleeping with fish heads behind my ears, but it didn't work."

"I'm not surprised!" Piper exclaimed, laughing. She had made her point. There was nothing else she could do if Margaret chose to ignore good advice.

Once they were inside the store, Piper let Margaret take the lead. She followed with the cart as the brusque woman navigated the crowded aisles.

"They're out of *D* batteries," Piper said, staring at the display with dismay. There were plenty of batteries in every other size, but the size *D*s were used in most boom boxes and flashlights, and had probably been cleaned out since early that morning.

"Not necessarily. They stock batteries all over this store. We might find some on a rack in the paint section," Margaret said, undaunted. She set off at a brisk march.

Despite Margaret's overbearing manner and misguided belief in superstition, Piper liked her. Her entertaining stories and her spunk more than made up for her sometimes scary schoolteacher tendencies, which were habitual and not intended to intimidate.

Margaret reached the end of the aisle and took a hard right. Just before she turned the corner, Piper heard the warning beep of an industrial machine backing up. Letting go of the cart, Piper raced to catch up in case Margaret couldn't hear the warning sound.

Rounding the corner, she saw Margaret facing the back wall, pulling packs of *D* batteries off a rack. She was oblivious to the beeping sound and moments away from being run over by a forklift.

Piper quickly raised her hands and froze the scene, seconds before the forklift flattened Margaret.

Piper swiftly looked round as she rushed forward, relieved to see that no one but Margaret and the forklift driver were in the back corner of the store at that moment. However, someone else could show up any second—after all, the store was packed with last-minute shoppers preparing for the coming storm—so she didn't have much time to lose. She grabbed Margaret's arm and yanked her clear of the forklift as she waved to set events back in motion.

"What on Earth!" Margaret gasped.

Piper let go of Margaret's arm and crossed her fingers, hoping neither the driver nor Margaret had a clue that something odd had just happened. They didn't seem to be suspicious, but they were definitely rattled.

"Are you okay?" The driver asked Margaret. He was trembling with fright, but he also sounded angry. "Didn't you hear the beep? That means get out of the way, lady!"

Ignoring Piper, Margaret stiffened and shook her finger at him. "Don't you sass me, young man. Pull that contraption out of *my* way. You can finish whatever you're doing after I get my batteries."

"Yes, ma'am." The chastened driver didn't argue. He shifted gears and drove forward, anxious to leave the scene of the near-accident as quickly as possible.

"Maybe next time he'll watch where he's going," Margaret said, and sniffed. She handed Piper the batteries she had already taken off the rack and began collecting more. "Bring the cart around, Piper."

"Isn't this enough?" Piper asked.

"Between the ghost in the road and almost getting flattened, the omens are not good," Margaret said as she turned toward Piper, her arms full of packaged batteries, including double *A*s and *C*s. "If George *is* coming our way, we can't have too many batteries."

Piper sighed as she walked back to the cart. *It could be worse. At least Margaret isn't stocking up on powdered cobra tongue and yak entrails,* she thought.

Chapter Six

"Is there anything else?" Paige stood in the Grants' open front doorway and wiped sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. She had just carried twenty potted plants in from the veranda. After working in the heat and humidity all afternoon, she was reluctant to leave the air-conditioned sanctuary, but she knew they didn't have a second to lose before the storm hit—all preparations had to be made, and quickly.

After lunch they had all pitched in to cover the windows at Agnes's and Margaret's houses. Before his death Frank had cut and drilled plywood to fit the windows in both homes. The location of each window was written on the corresponding piece of plywood with permanent marker, and all the pieces were stored in the women's garages along with a bag of screws. When the windows were done, Phoebe and Piper had stayed behind to help Agnes and

Margaret clean out their refrigerators, while Paige had returned with Ben and Sharon to clear the veranda.

"I don't think so," Ben replied. He was using a bristle brush to remove spider webs from a narrow wooden table that stood on the porch between the front windows. "After Sharon and I get this table moved into the garage, that's it. We're done."

"Just in time too." Sharon tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced at the overcast sky. "You'd better go get cleaned up while we still have hot water for showers, Paige."

"Oh, right. No power, no water heater," Paige said.

"No power, no water," Sharon reminded her.

"That's right . . . okay, I'd better get moving, then." Paige hadn't realized how much she relied on everyday modern conveniences—such as hot water. "I've never gone four or five days without taking a bath or a shower before."

"You won't have to go that long," Ben said. "A bucket bath isn't as gross as it sounds."

Paige recoiled in mock horror at the thought.

"He's not kidding," Sharon said, grinning.

Ben placed his hands on his lower back and stretched to relieve the kinks. "Salad and leftovers for dinner is sounding better every minute."

Paige smiled. Ben had complained when Sharon suggested that they eat everything in the

refrigerator that could go bad if the power went out.

"Not slaving over a hot stove is sounding better every minute too," Sharon said.

"Sounds great," Paige said. "So if you're sure you don't need me anymore—" As she started to close the front door, Sharon called out.

"Take one of those large ferns upstairs with you, Paige." Sharon gestured toward the potted plants Paige had just carried in. "That'll save me a trip."

"Okay." Paige closed the door quickly before Sharon could ask her to do anything else. She had been waiting all day for a chance to poke around the kitchen without Sharon finding out, and this would be her only chance before the house filled up with neighbors and sisters. She left the fern on the floor and hurried toward the kitchen.

Everyone had been so busy all day, Paige still hadn't had a chance to tell her sisters about Sharon's folk medicines and charms. Although Ben was confident the house had been cleared of everything his wife had conjured or empowered, Sharon could have snuck off at some point to make more. She had to be watched, but Paige was too worn out to stay awake all night. Piper and Phoebe would have to take shifts, assuming Paige could convince them that it was necessary. Hard evidence was needed to prove that Sharon was into real magic and not just playing with harmless rhymes and recipes.

A mouse-away talisman should do the trick, Paige thought as she opened the pantry doors. Paige had planned to dash in, grab the talisman, and leave, figuring Sharon would blame Ben if she noticed it was missing. After the conversation this morning it was clear that Sharon wouldn't listen to reason or take advice from anyone; not her husband, her best friend, or her best friend's sisters. In fact, if Sharon knew they were worried about her hazardous hobby, she would be determined to prove there was nothing to worry about. Paige suspected Margaret would have a similar attitude.

Paige knelt down and reached under the bottom shelf, but the pest control charm was no longer there. Either Ben had taken it or Sharon had moved it herself.

"Rats." Frustrated, Paige hit the floor with her fist. When her hand struck the wood, a loose board rattled. Realizing there shouldn't be a loose board in the relatively new house, she cast a furtive look over her shoulder.

Paige pressed a corner of the wobbly board, which, as she suspected, raised the opposite corner. She carefully removed the plank and stifled a gasp as she surveyed Sharon's stash of spell ingredients.

The space under the floor was the same dimensions as the pantry. It was filled with glass and earthen jars, wood and metal boxes of various shapes and sizes, and more than

twenty cloth, paper, and plastic bags. The containers held an impressive assortment of powders, roots, twigs, leaves, seeds, and other rare plant and animal parts and by-products. There were healing agents, including aloe vera, ginseng, horsetail, and myrrh; herbs that were commonly used for protection or good luck, such as bay laurel and garlic; and lavender and pine needles for purifying and cleansing. A bag of acorns and a sack containing bistort root, both known to enhance fertility, were within easy reach. *So a baby might be in the works,* Paige thought.

She spotted a corked bottle marked "vervain," an all-purpose herb favored by Druids. There were countless other things no one kept in an ordinary kitchen: ground rabbit fur, bat droppings, rose petals, lizard tails, and dandelion seeds. Some of the ingredients—vervain, rowan wood, mandrake, and dragon's blood—had significant magical properties, but they were not dangerous lying dormant in storage containers. And in fact Leo had told Piper that it was possible that nothing would happen even if an *active* spell interacted with a violent storm. But Paige didn't want to bet on it.

As Paige replaced the board over the hidden cupboard, she heard footsteps coming down the hall.

"Water or iced tea, Ben?" Sharon asked as she approached the kitchen.

"Water's fine," Ben answered as Paige orbed out.

A second later she materialized in the guest room. There hadn't been time to close the pantry door, but that could be easily explained. If Sharon noticed, she could just say she'd been hungry after laboring for several hours in the Florida heat.

And right now getting clean and cooled off is my top priority, Paige thought as she jumped into the shower. She stayed under the water longer than usual, luxuriating in the spray of hot water on her back. Since Hurricane George would probably knock out the power, she had no idea when her next shower would be.

Piper and Phoebe were sitting on the rollaway when Paige finally emerged from the bathroom wearing shorts and a tank top. The shower had revitalized her waning spirits and energy, and she was ready to tackle the problem of Sharon's misguided magic.

Meanwhile, Phoebe and Piper were comparing notes on Agnes and Margaret.

"Agnes didn't want to keep anything that was less than half-full or had an imminent expiration date," Phoebe said. "Imminent meaning five days from now or less. She hates a cluttered refrigerator."

"You got off easy, then." Piper blew a wisp of damp hair off her forehead. "Margaret wouldn't throw anything away. We put bits of this and

dabs of that into airtight bags and then crammed everything into coolers."

"Does she line them with towels?" Phoebe asked. "Apparently, towels insulate block ice so it lasts longer."

"Well, did Agnes have you empty the ice cube maker so melted ice water won't puddle on the floor?" Piper asked Phoebe.

Phoebe frowned, shaking her head. "No, she must have done that while we were boarding up the windows. There were three bags of ice cubes in the freezer."

"Margaret made me top off the gas tank in the car," Piper said. "Gas pumps don't work without electricity."

"Neither do washers and dryers. Thanks for doing the laundry, Paige." Phoebe patted the folded stack of clothes behind her.

"You're welcome," Paige said, smiling. At least her sisters had worked as hard as she had today. She sat down on the edge of the bed. "Did you find any of Margaret's spell ingredients, Piper?"

Piper blinked, caught off guard by the question. "Does Margaret have spell ingredients? I know she has some odd things lying around to cook up home remedies, but spells?"

"I'm pretty sure she does," Paige said, shifting her position to sit cross-legged. "Sharon has an impressive collection."

"I know Agnes doesn't have anything," Phoebe said. "She thinks Margaret's cures and

preventatives are 'a bunch of superstitious hooey.' Quote, unquote."

"Then she knows what Margaret and Sharon have been up to," Paige said.

Phoebe nodded. "Agnes insisted that we take the trail back over here so Poncho could get some exercise before the storm hits and we're all stuck inside. I said something about bears, and she told me that Margaret walks around with mugwort in her shoes when she takes the trail to protect her from wild beasts."

"Margaret does make a beeswax salve to keep her from going deaf," Piper said. "But it seems harmless enough. Plus, she's already deaf. She was almost run down by a forklift at the store because she didn't hear it beeping as it reversed."

"I have a disturbing story too. Ben makes weekly sweeps through the house looking for Sharon's magical creations," Paige added.

Piper sighed and looked at Paige. "You're going to tell us our visit has turned into a mission, aren't you?"

"It's kind of looking that way." Paige gave her sisters a quick summary of everything she had discovered, from finding the original talisman in the pantry to Sharon's medicinal magic being the source of the Grants' marital trouble. "If nothing in our lives is a coincidence, then this probably is a Charmed situation."

"But to save the Grants from what?" Piper

asked, perplexed. "They aren't being threatened by a demon."

"We need to save them from themselves," Paige said. "If what Ben says is true, Sharon has become dangerously dependent on her beliefs. She thinks folk magic can cure or fix anything, even protect her home and the people she loves from a hurricane."

Piper sighed. "Now that you mention it, I get the impression that's how Margaret feels too."

"It sounds like those two ladies are in way over their heads." Phoebe turned her face toward the ceiling vent when the air conditioner whooshed on. "And they don't even know it."

"We have to make them stop using folk magic," Paige said. "We can't assume that amateur magic is immune—"

"Shhh," Phoebe whispered, pointing toward the door.

They all turned to look, just as someone knocked three times.

"Come in!" Paige called. She smiled calmly when Sharon stuck her head in the door. "Hey, Sharon! What's up?"

"Not much, yet." Sharon looked at Piper and Phoebe. "Would you two mind if I took a shower? Our tub is filled with water to use for flushing the toilets and brushing teeth in case the power goes out."

"No, of course not. Go right ahead," Phoebe said. "Can we help with dinner or anything?"

"Ben's got that under control, but there is something else." Sharon looked as though she were about to ask them to slay the neighborhood dragon. "Would you mind playing dominoes with Margaret and Agnes? Two players aren't enough. But five is just right."

"We don't know how to play," Paige said.

Sharon waved away the problem with a languid hand. "It's easy. You'll love it. And besides, those two need someone to referee. Margaret has been known to throw tiles across the room when she gets stuck with a high point count."

"Sounds like fun," Piper said as she stood up. "I'm game."

Sharon isn't giving us a choice anyway, Paige thought suspiciously as she followed her sisters downstairs. *Is she really going to take a shower, or does she have something else brewing in the bathroom?*

Paige suddenly realized that trying to remove all the magic from the house might be impossible without Sharon's cooperation. Sharon was hooked on the craft, and she probably had things hidden in places where even Ben wouldn't think to look.

Paige dropped the uneaten portion of her sandwich on her plate. After two helpings of leftovers there wasn't room left in her stomach for another bite. She and Margaret had polished off the packet of honey ham that was due to expire

in three days. Everyone else had chowed down on oven roasted turkey sandwiches, leftover fried chicken, meatloaf, or green bean casserole.

"Okay, people! Hurry up and clear this table." Phoebe spoke in a fake drill sergeant voice. She began stacking dinner dishes, then scowled at Agnes. "You're wasting valuable domino time chewing, Agnes. Swallow."

"But don't choke!" Piper cautioned the elderly woman.

Agnes held up a hand, chewed a bit more, than swallowed. "I have no intention of choking to death, Piper. I'm going to drift away in my sleep."

Poncho barked, and Agnes slipped him a potato chip. The poodle had been sitting by her chair with his unwavering puppy-dog eyes fixed on her food for the entire meal.

Paige noticed that Phoebe's playful expression had faded. Her sister had grown very fond of the old woman over the previous two days, and the thought of her passing was obviously upsetting.

"And," Agnes continued, "I plan to give Frank a piece of my mind the instant I see him again."

"For what?" Piper asked.

"For leaving without me!" Agnes exclaimed with a grin.

"Just be glad Frank isn't haunting you," Margaret said.

"Oh, I am, Margaret. I am." Agnes rolled her eyes and took a sip of tea. "Don't forget, I brought a peach cobbler for dessert."

"I won't forget," Margaret said. "My stomach just needs an hour to make room."

Paige smiled at the exchange, but she wasn't at ease. And she wasn't the only one. Sharon had been preoccupied and quiet all evening. They had a good excuse for discomfort—the latest weather reports had confirmed that George was bearing down on them. Paige was concerned about a clash between nature and magic, while Sharon was probably worried about hurricane damage to her loved ones and her home.

It had started raining shortly after they finished stowing the potted plants and patio furniture inside. The wind and rain had increased steadily since then, with an occasional gust that rattled the chimney. But the forest area was so far inland Ben was confident the hurricane wouldn't be more than a category one when it hit. In fact, he had not even lowered the storm shutters over the two windows in the living room, because he didn't think it would be necessary. Margaret agreed with him, and even Agnes didn't object, since she wanted a view of the storm. Piper thought they were nuts, but Ben had promised to lower the shutters the moment it became necessary. He had also assured her that he could operate them with a hand crank if the power was out.

"Is everyone playing?" Phoebe asked.

"Can seven people play at the same time?" Piper asked as she reached down for the box of domino tiles, pen, and score pad she had set on the floor before dinner.

"Six people, max," Sharon said. "Ben put dinner together, so I'll do the dishes while you all play."

"Make it five," Paige said, standing up. "I'll help Sharon."

"I can handle it, Paige." Sharon said. She didn't look at Paige when she spoke.

"I know, but I'm going to help anyway." Paige picked up a stack of plates and carried them into the kitchen. She didn't want a hostile confrontation, but she had to get Sharon alone and make her understand that her magic might be a danger to everyone.

The rest of the gang set up the game in the dining room, eager to play.

"I had no idea dominoes could be so much fun," Piper said after she found the double nine and placed it in the middle of the table.

"Let's get a set when we get home," Phoebe agreed, and began turning the colored-dot side of the tiles facedown.

"And we can stomp Leo," Piper said, looking up with a wicked smile. "He's so considerate he won't stand a chance."

"Until he realizes that cutthroat tactics are the only way to beat us," Phoebe said. "Leo does have

a competitive streak when it comes to games."

"It's not just a *game*." Agnes gasped, pretending to be shocked. "It's *dominoes*."

"That's one thing Agnes and I agree on," Margaret said, missing her neighbor's sarcasm as she began choosing seven tiles. She abruptly turned to her host. "Did you remember to fill the propane tank for your grill, Ben?"

"Yes, Margaret," Ben said stiffly, then relaxed. "But thanks for reminding me before it was too late to do anything about it." The guests all laughed.

By the time the table was cleared, Paige had deduced that George wasn't the cause of Sharon's mood. *She* was.

"Do you want the mustard and ketchup in the fridge or in the pantry?" Paige asked.

"Fridge," Sharon answered shortly as she fed the remains of Paige's sandwich to Poncho, who sat at her feet.

"What about the bread?" Paige asked.

"Fridge," Sharon said. She scraped the dishes into the sink and turned on the water to run the garbage disposal.

Apparently, Poncho knew the loud grinding sound meant there would be no more handouts, since as soon as the disposal was turned on he trotted off to find Agnes in the dining room.

Paige couldn't dismiss Sharon's monosyllabic answers as fatigue or worry. Something had

happened between Sharon's shower and when she had sat down to eat. Most likely she had discovered that the pantry talisman was gone, or that her stash of herbs and other magical makings had been tampered with.

"What's wrong, Sharon?" Paige asked bluntly.

Sharon slowly put a plate into the dishwasher, avoiding Paige's gaze. Then, after a moment, she decided to answer. "Why didn't you take the fern upstairs when I asked you to earlier?"

Paige was thrown off by the unexpected question, and she didn't have an immediate answer. Sharon took her silence as an admission of wrongdoing.

"Ben told you not to, didn't he?" Sharon fumed.

Paige was confused—did Sharon think that she and Ben were plotting against her?

"Ben was outside with you," Paige said.

Laughter and a squeal of fake outrage erupted in the dining room. "You took my spot, Phoebe!" Piper complained loudly.

"In the words of all bad guys everywhere, heh-heh-heh-heh!" Phoebe said in a gravelly voice.

Sharon glared at Paige, but she was careful not to raise her voice. "Why are you siding with him?"

"I'm not," Paige said. "Why would you—"

"I saw the phone bill, Paige. I know he called you last month." Sharon's expression was a mix of sadness, triumph, and anger.

"Okay, I'm lost," Paige said, throwing her hands up. "I thought we were talking about the fern."

"We are." Sharon paused, balling her hands into fists. She was genuinely upset and trying to calm down. "Ben doesn't believe that having ferns in the house will protect us from the hurricane, and he thinks I'm an idiot because I don't see the harm in giving it a shot, since I read ferns have protective powers."

Paige instantly regained her wits and took advantage of the opening. "There is harm, though, Sharon. Messing around with the occult can be dangerous, and Ben is worried—"

"Ben is hysterical," Sharon countered.

"The herbs and roots you're using in your charms could have very grave consequences, especially in a hurricane," Paige explained. "And a house full of ferns won't protect you."

"You sound just like him," Sharon scoffed. "Condescending and judgmental. You shouldn't meddle in other people's business, Paige. Certainly not when my husband is using you against me! We're supposed to be friends."

"We are friends," Paige said. Sharon's hurt and anger were obscuring the point she was trying to make.

"I don't want to argue with you, Paige."

Sharon sounded sincere, but Paige knew the remark was part of a practiced ploy. Sharon often called a truce to buy time so she could fall back and regroup. Paige decided that for her purposes subterfuge would be a much more effective countermaneuver than fighting. Sharon couldn't cast spells if she was doing something else. Paige made a mental note to take this into consideration as she planned her next move.

"Yes!" Phoebe's voice carried in from the dining room. "I'm out!"

"Don't get cocky," Margaret barked.

"I don't want to argue either. Besides, those guys are having too much fun without us." Paige nodded toward the dining room.

"Yeah, they are," Sharon said, relaxing. She gave Paige a tight smile. "Let's just forget it."

That was too easy. Sharon doesn't give up, and this isn't over, Paige thought as they joined the others in the dining room. The situation was just on hold.

Two rowdy games of dominoes were followed by a romantic comedy DVD, popcorn, and a late-night weather recap. The hurricane was still hours away, but the winds outside were already blowing at tropical-storm intensity. Even though the TV satellite dish and the lights were still working when they called it quits at midnight, Ben and Sharon made sure everyone had a flashlight before they retired to the master bedroom. As Paige followed Piper and Phoebe up

the stairs to their bedroom, she glanced over the banister into the living room where Margaret and Agnes were sharing the pullout couch.

"Doesn't that dog have to go out?" Margaret asked as Agnes slipped under the sheets.

"I took him out before we started the movie. Good night, Margaret." Agnes said, then rolled over. She was asleep the instant her eyes closed.

As soon as the girls got upstairs, Phoebe called dibs on the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face.

"It's all yours, Phoebe. I'm going to call Leo," Piper said as she took her cell phone from her purse and sat on the bed. "Oh, wait, I forgot. There's no signal out here."

"Didn't you call him on Ben and Sharon's phone last night?" Paige asked. She was sitting in the window alcove, flipping through a magazine. "I'm sure they won't mind if you use it again."

"Well, actually, when I called him last night I just went"—Piper cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered loudly—"Leo!"

"He *orbed* in?" Paige asked, raising her eyebrows. "What if someone had seen him?"

"I bet they would have thought it was a ghost," Piper said, then continued, frowning, "I don't want to risk having Leo orb tonight with the storm-doesn't-like-magic thing going on, though."

"Orbing isn't a spell," Paige said.

"I'll just use the phone. I want to know if Wyatt calmed down after seeing me last night. Leo orbed in with him," Piper said as she reached for the phone on the nightstand.

Paige put the magazine down and stood up. Despite the grueling day, she was too anxious to sit still. That was just as well; maybe she wouldn't have trouble staying awake while she was on Sharon-watch. Earlier, in the break between dominoes and the movie, Ben had pulled her aside and apologized for putting her on the spot. He had also thanked her for trying to talk some sense into Sharon. After talking to Ben, Paige was convinced he had found every talisman and potion in the house. He was surprised to hear about Sharon's accusation regarding the ferns—Ben wasn't even aware of their potentially magical powers. In any case, the pots of ferns didn't count—in their natural state, plants and the spell ingredients were not a threat.

"Hi, Leo!" Piper instantly brightened at the sound of her husband's voice.

Paige walked into the hall and quietly closed the door to give Piper some privacy. She had thought Ben and Sharon shared the same kind of happily-ever-after love that her sister and brother-in-law had. No matter what terrible thing fate dumped on Piper and Leo, Paige was positive their love could never be destroyed. She had been surprised to learn of Ben and Sharon's

marital trouble, and she had tried to help heal the breach between them, but she was afraid she had only made things worse.

Paige was so lost in thought she almost didn't hear the low voices in the kitchen, but she was alerted by the sounds of cooking. *Or spell-casting,* she thought as she tiptoed down the stairs. She worried that her warning may have pushed Sharon into creating a protection charm to boost the natural power of the ferns . . . or worse.

When she stepped onto the hardwood floor, Paige cast a glance at the pullout. Luckily, Poncho slept as soundly as Agnes, and neither of them stirred when she walked past them into the dining room. However, Margaret's side of the bed was empty. The door that connected the dining room to the kitchen was ajar, and light spilled through the crack between the door and the frame. Paige hid in the shadows to survey the scene. The pantry door was open, and several spell ingredients were strewn across the center island. Margaret and Sharon huddled over a pot nearby.

They were casting a spell, just as Paige had feared.

"Piper was curious," Margaret was saying to Sharon. "She thought the legends were interesting, but she has no faith in the power of the elements to put things right. Most people I've met won't risk tempting fate."

Most superstitious people usually don't want to admit they're superstitious, Paige thought.

Margaret stared into the large pot. "Did this sit in the sun all day yesterday?"

Sharon nodded. "Yes, and I measured everything exactly, especially the bat droppings. I don't want any of my beautiful trees to fall over."

"If we have any left over, we'll pour it on the oak in Agnes's backyard," Margaret said. She picked up a pair of scissors and snipped bits of hair into a wooden bowl. "So what's the problem with Paige?"

"She either knows or strongly believes there's more to the workings of the world than science or fate," Sharon said. She sighed and shook her head. "I just wish Ben hadn't dragged her into our troubles."

Margaret crushed the hair with a pestle. "Ben's attitude doesn't interfere with your personal power. But Paige's intrusive behavior does."

Because Sharon doesn't feel she needs to compete with Ben, Paige thought. *Ben doesn't drain her energy that way.*

"Someone got into my spell supplies today," Sharon said. "Ben would have confronted me if he'd found a bag labeled 'powdered ram horn.' It had to be Paige."

Paige frowned. She hadn't touched anything except the board. Sharon must have had it rigged so she'd be able to tell if someone tampered with her hiding place.

"I don't want to do this, Margaret, but we have no choice," Sharon said, shaking her head as she placed circles of freshly cut ivy vine inside the bowl. "It's the only way to get Paige off my back."

You don't want to do what, exactly? But Paige didn't have time to wonder. She had to prevent the two women from finishing the spell—without using magic. Witnessing *real* magical power would strengthen their resolve to practice the craft, not encourage them to abandon it.

Paige could hear the wind whistling through the vented hood over the stove. Outside, branches from the magnolias and crape myrtles scraped against the side of the house. Margaret had explained that the leading edge of the hurricane was less formidable than the forces that came behind the eye. If magic were added into the mix, the result could be pure chaos.

There was no ideal course of action, but Paige decided that playing dumb seemed safer and more prudent than accusing the women of being witches. Faking a yawn, Paige walked into the kitchen as if she didn't know that Sharon was about to sabotage her with a spell.

"You two couldn't sleep either, huh?" Paige asked, pausing by the pantry to get the box of tea bags she had seen earlier. "I thought some tea and a little more of Agnes's peach cobbler might help. Waiting for a hurricane is kind of nerve-racking."

Sharon and Margaret didn't answer. Instead, they began reciting in unison:

Bound by blood and ivy vine,
These from now will only mind
Their own business,
Not yours or mine.

Sharon and Margaret's audacity caught Paige off guard. By the time she realized that orbing out was her only hope of escaping the spell's power, it was too late.

Phoebe sat on the rollaway, repairing the damage a day of hurricane prep had done to her nails. She was sleepy, but she didn't want to miss a minute of Piper's hilarious account of her adventures with Margaret earlier that day.

"The idea of a skunk ape isn't new," Piper said.

"Another version of Bigfoot, right?" Phoebe asked as she slipped her nail file back into her manicure kit and zipped it closed.

"Except that skunk apes smell bad." Piper stretched out on the bed with her hands cupped under her head. "You know, a lot of people have disappeared in Florida swamps over the years."

"That doesn't surprise me," Phoebe said, "but I doubt there's anything supernatural going on. They probably get lost or attacked by alligators or bitten by poisonous snakes."

"Margaret said that a man vanished in the Everglades for a month a few years ago," Piper said. She turned her head to meet Phoebe's curious gaze. "He was found on a floating island."

Phoebe blinked. "You mean a boat?"

"No," Piper said as she turned onto her side and propped her head in her hand. "Peat builds up in the swamps and pieces break off and drift away. The guy was so disoriented, he couldn't find his way out."

"That sounds like stray sod," Phoebe said. She had done extensive research in mythology when she had first learned she was a witch. Most concepts believed to be supernatural were universal, and cultures throughout the world had incorporated them into their lore in varying forms. However, this was the first variation of stray sod she had heard of outside of Ireland.

"What's that?" Piper asked.

"Enchanted grass," Phoebe explained. "It's a Celtic myth. If someone steps on a clump, they lose all sense of direction. Landmarks disappear, and they wander aimlessly." The myth reminded Phoebe of the vision she had had of Agnes wandering through the mist and then vanishing suddenly. She hadn't mentioned it to Agnes, who would have dismissed the idea as more fanciful foolishness, but she had to tell Paige and Piper. She decided to wait until morning. They'd had enough for one day.

"An interesting comparison, but there's a

scientific explanation for floating islands," Piper said, sitting up. "Margaret told me an interesting theory that would work for the Bermuda Triangle, too. Some scientists think storms or waterspouts might cause methane hydrates to be released from the ocean bed. The hydrates temporarily make seawater less dense than ships, and then they sink."

"What about all the airplanes that have vanished?" Phoebe asked.

"Good question!" Piper grinned. "Margaret left that part out."

"She's an enigma, that's for sure," Phoebe said. "Don't you wonder how a schoolteacher with an obvious respect for science could get so caught up in folk magic?"

Piper leaned forward, as though she had been pondering the same question. Then she shrugged. "Not really."

Phoebe frowned. She didn't really care either. She had an advice column to write, and she hadn't thought about her responses to "Buried in Buckshot" and "Lost in Boston" since that morning. As she got up to get her laptop, Paige breezed back into the room.

"We have to stop meddling in Sharon and Ben's business," Paige stated flatly. "If Sharon wants to play witch and ruin her marriage, that's up to her."

"That's the way I see it," Piper said. "I have my own problems to worry about. I'm pretty

sure that Leo only told me Wyatt was better today so I'd relax and enjoy being stranded in a hurricane three thousand miles away from home."

"I have to take care of the people who *ask* for my help," Phoebe said. "That's what the *Bay Mirror* pays me to do."

"I have to talk to Leo." Piper turned to Paige. "Will you orb me home?"

"No! That's a personal gain no-no, Piper. Your problem, not mine," Paige said. She sat on the bed. "You won't believe what just happened in the kitchen—"

"Can you be quiet? I'm kind of busy," Phoebe said, cutting Paige off. Suddenly compelled to get her work done, she dug her laptop out of her suitcase. She was relieved she had put off telling her sisters about the vision of Agnes vanishing in the storm—she didn't have time for a lengthy discussion right now. She had to hand-copy the notes stored in her computer before the power went off.

"I'll just call Leo again the old-fashioned way," Piper muttered, ignoring Paige on her way out the door.

Paige leaned back against the headboard. "I can't wait for this hurricane to be over so we can fly back to San Francisco and get back to the business of being real witches who fight evil."

"Deadlines before demons," Phoebe said as she set her laptop on the reading table and

plugged it in. She opened the file folder that contained the letters she was considering using for her column and pulled out a blank piece of paper. After she copied her notes she could work with a flashlight, paper, and pen if necessary. *Preferably in a closet where no one will bother me,* Phoebe thought as she turned on the computer.

Chapter Seven

Piper left the guest room with nothing on her mind except Leo and Wyatt. As she crept down the stairs, she wondered how things had been going at P3. She had been so preoccupied by Wyatt's separation anxieties she hadn't bothered to call the club to check in. But the manager she had left in charge was exceptional and would have contacted her if anything had gone wrong, so she could assume all was well. Satisfied that P3 was covered, her mind returned to her husband and her son.

Piper glanced at the living room windows as she reached the bottom of the staircase. Although the shutters hadn't been lowered, it was too dark to see anything. However, she could hear the steady drum of rain and the howling wind. The overhanging veranda roof protected a few feet of space around the front of the house, but she had second thoughts about going outside and decided to call Leo from the kitchen instead. She

was halfway through the dining room when the sound of voices stopped her in her tracks.

"Is that cork in tight?" Margaret ask in the kitchen.

At the sound of the teacher's voice, Piper ducked into the shadows by the china cabinet that sat in a corner of the room near the kitchen. The two women were unaware of her as they left the kitchen and headed for the front door. In the glow of Margaret's flashlight Piper could see that they were wearing rain slickers. Each woman carried a corked jug.

"Yes, it is," Sharon whispered. She pushed on the cork for good measure.

"What?" Margaret shone the flashlight on Sharon's face.

"Yes," Sharon repeated, nodding. She was obviously used to dealing with Margaret's hearing problem. "It's on tight."

Piper looked at the woman and the dog asleep on the sofa bed. Agnes snored softly, oblivious to the antics of her neighbors. Somewhere in the house Ben was just as peacefully unaware of what was going on.

"Good," Margaret said. "The wind is blowing hard enough to knock us clean off our feet."

"We've had a lot of rain since the last time you used this potion," Sharon said, pausing at the door to face the older woman. "Maybe the tree roots aren't drawn up as much as they were after the drought."

"The roots come to the surface to get water," Margaret explained. "Too much rain causes them to fall over. The ground becomes saturated, and the roots aren't deep enough to anchor the tree."

Piper couldn't care less about the trees, or what the two women were up to. She just wanted them to leave so she could call Leo.

When Sharon opened the door, the wind ripped it out of her grasp. It flew open as a gust of wind blew through the frame.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea, Margaret." There was an edge of fear in Sharon's voice as she stared out at the driving rain. She glanced back. "We should have done this earlier."

In or out! Piper thought testily. *One or the other, just make up your mind. Other people have clandestine plans to carry out too.*

"It wouldn't have been as effective," Margaret said. "The magic is more potent after the storm starts."

Yeah, as long as the amateur spell works or doesn't go berserk, Piper thought, twirling her finger in a speed-up motion.

Margaret handed Sharon her jug and motioned the younger woman through the doorway. She pulled the door closed behind her.

Piper hurried into the garage, which she figured was the only area in or around the house that was safely unoccupied. Ben's Porsche was parked on one side, and all the outside furniture,

plants, and the propane grill were stored in the other half. Sharon's SUV and the rental car were parked in the driveway. Piper wondered if the rental insurance covered hurricane damage as she closed the door and called Leo.

Wyatt was crying when Leo materialized. "He was almost asleep," Leo said weakly.

"I *knew* you were still having trouble," Piper said. When she reached to take the boy, Leo stepped back. "Hey!"

"We can't reward him again, Piper. If you take him now, we'll be reinforcing the behavior. I don't think we want him throwing crying fits every time you leave the house."

Piper knew he had a point, but she wasn't in the mood to be fair. She wanted to go home and be with her family.

"It's been five days," Piper said. "Maybe he's too young to be without Mommy for such a long period of time."

"Maybe," Leo conceded, "but we can't do anything about it now."

"Yes, we can," Piper said. "Just orb me home where I belong."

"Right now you belong here." Leo shifted Wyatt to his other shoulder. The baby's plaintive cries became wretched sobs. "You can't just disappear."

"I don't see why not." Piper folded her arms as her stubborn streak took hold. "People have vanished in hurricanes before."

"Not from the inside of a secure house, they

haven't," Leo said. His mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed. "Why would you even suggest this?"

Piper clenched her jaw. But when Leo knew he was right, he could match her obstinate determination.

"Fine," Piper spat. Assuming the battle was lost, she turned to stomp off, but she cringed when a branch fell and clattered down the sloped garage roof. Still, she didn't turn around until she heard Leo address her.

"Did you use your powers today?" he asked, patting Wyatt's back.

"Once," Piper confessed with a sheepish shrug. "I froze a forklift so Margaret wouldn't get flattened. We were in a store shopping for supplies and she didn't hear it backing up. She's deaf," Piper explained.

"And that's all you did?" Leo asked, frowning. "What about Phoebe and Paige?"

"I don't know," Piper said, annoyed. "I didn't ask. Now are you going to take me home?"

"No."

Piper's temper flared. "If you cared about me, you wouldn't leave me here in the middle of a hurricane!" She said angrily. Her dark eyes flashed as she spun on her heels and headed back inside.

"Something very weird is going on, Wyatt," Leo said as he orbed out.

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Paige lingered in the shower. The lure of hot water had been too enticing to resist, knowing that the tap might shut off at any moment. However, she suddenly realized that the only thing worse than not having a shower for five days would be having unrinsed shampoo in her hair for that long. She quickly finished washing her hair, turned the water off, and grabbed a towel.

Sitting at the vanity, she took her time toweling dry. There was no need to rush. Phoebe was copying notes for her column and didn't want to talk, and Piper didn't want to discuss whatever was bothering her after she returned from calling Leo. Certain there wasn't a demon problem back home, Paige had quickly lost interest in Piper's snit. Getting through the storm was her main concern. She couldn't use her powers again until the hurricane and the threat of botched magic had passed.

Paige reached into her toiletry bag for her brush, but it wasn't there. She was sure she had put it away, but she found it on the sink counter among Phoebe's combs and Piper's round vent brush. Something about the misplaced brush seemed important, but she had no idea why. As she dried her hair, her thoughts turned back to magic and the awesome responsibility of being a Charmed One.

Phoebe sat up with a start. She had fallen asleep at the small desk in the corner of the guest room with her head on her arms. Awakening in total

darkness made her disoriented for a few seconds; she looked around to try to get her bearings. The digital alarm clock and the bathroom nightlight were both dark.

The power had gone off.

Phoebe felt across the tabletop for her flashlight and flicked it on, then aimed the beam at her sisters.

"What?" Paige groaned when she woke up, shielding her eyes against the light shining on her face. "What's wrong?"

"The power's off," Phoebe said, lowering the beam.

"Did Leo come back?" Piper asked groggily. She fumbled under her pillow for the flashlight she had stashed there.

"No, are you expecting him?" Paige asked, sitting up.

"Just hoping." Piper ran her fingers through her tangled hair. "He thinks something weird is going on here."

"Yeah, I'd say there is," Phoebe said with a touch of sarcasm. "It's called a hurricane."

"You asked if Leo had *come back*." Paige scowled. "Did he orb in again?"

Phoebe frowned. Orbing didn't seem like a good idea in the middle of the storm with four other people so nearby. Sharon and Margaret believed in the supernatural, but they weren't ready to accept a man who came and went as a stream of light.

"Did you go out in the storm, Piper?" Paige asked. "What were you thinking? A tree could have fallen on you! Then—wham! No more Power of Three."

"Relax, Paige," Piper said, brushing off her sister's concern. "I met Leo in the garage. But Margaret and Sharon went outside."

"They did? Why?" Paige swung her feet onto the floor.

"To pour something on the trees so they won't fall over," Piper said. She yawned and stretched.

Phoebe's thoughts instantly returned to her recent visions. The tree in Agnes's backyard would fall, and Agnes would vanish in the storm. She couldn't do anything to save the tree, but Piper and Paige could help her keep the old woman in the house.

"I need your help—," Phoebe began.

Piper hopped out of bed and went into the bathroom as if she hadn't heard a word Phoebe had just said.

Phoebe stared after Piper, taken aback by her sudden departure. Her sister was abrupt sometimes, but she was never rude and dismissive.

"What time is it?" Paige asked, showing no interest in what Phoebe had started to say either.

Phoebe looked at her watch. "It's just after six."

"I wonder if anyone else is up," Paige said as she slipped on her robe, went to the door, and cracked it open. "I hear voices."

Piper opened the bathroom door. "There's no water."

"For teeth brushing or flushing?" Paige asked.

Piper cocked her head. "Does it matter?"

"The water in the bucket near the sink is for flushing and washing," Paige explained. "Just be sure the water stays clean as long as possible. Sharon has bottles of drinking water downstairs."

"Did I miss the lecture on handy hurricane tips?" Piper joked.

"I spent a whole day with Ben and Sharon," Paige explained. "All they talked about was how to maximize comfort and minimize inconvenience during a hurricane."

"How do you minimize inconvenience if the roof blows off?" Piper asked.

Or if a tree crushes your house and you get lost in the storm? Phoebe thought.

"Ben said that we'll be fine as long as George isn't stronger than a category two," Paige said, frowning. "A three or a four, and we might be in trouble."

"That's not very reassuring," Piper said.

Phoebe wasn't reassured either. She took another stab at capturing her sisters' wandering attention. "I'm worried about Agnes and Poncho—"

Piper held up her hands. "I can't worry about anyone but Wyatt and Leo right now."

"Let's just worry about getting through the

storm," Paige said as she walked out into the hallway.

"What are the chances of getting a hot cup of coffee?" Piper asked as she followed Paige into the hall.

"Very good," Paige said, "if Ben can open the garage door to use the grill."

"Open the garage in a hurricane?" Piper asked, incredulous.

"Something about fumes," Paige said. "If the winds are too bad, we'll have to wait for the eye to pass over. Then it will be calm enough . . ."

Phoebe stared at the empty doorway. It seemed odd that her sisters hadn't asked her to go with them, but it was also a relief. The guest room had suddenly become the perfect working environment: solitude with no distractions. Opening the file folder, Phoebe pulled out a sheet of paper and picked up her pen. She started to jot down the sentence fragments forming in her mind, but she couldn't concentrate and they quickly slipped away. She was alone, but she was still distracted. The Agnes problem nagged at the edges of her thoughts, a constant diversion that was impossible to ignore.

Compromise was the only solution to the conflicting imperatives of wanting to write and protecting Agnes, her Innocent. Since Agnes had vanished during daylight hours in the vision, the potential situation hadn't interfered with Phoebe's ability to work last night. However,

dawn was less than an hour away. She wouldn't get anywhere with her column unless she could work and watch Agnes at the same time.

Easier said than done, Phoebe realized when she got to the bottom of the stairs. Ben was coming back from the garage with a teakettle of boiling water. Agnes walked behind him, wearing a robe over her nightgown and toweling Poncho dry.

Phoebe's pulse raced with sudden anxiety. "Did you go outside, Agnes?"

"Goodness, no!" Agnes laughed. "Poncho used the little dog's room by the garage door. He doesn't go far from the house in the dark."

Phoebe exhaled with relief. Since Poncho had just gone out, she wouldn't have to worry about Agnes going outside again for a while.

"Go grab a seat in the living room with your sisters, Phoebe," Ben said. "We'll have coffee and doughnuts ready in a minute."

"Maybe I'll just set up shop in the kitchen," Phoebe said, holding up her papers. "I have a column due—"

"How often do you get stuck in a hurricane?" Ben teased, cutting her off. "It's an event! You're supposed to eat, drink, talk, watch the storm, and listen to the radio. Nobody works."

Phoebe's compulsion to write was strong, but it wouldn't hurt to jump-start the day with coffee and conversation.

"Okay," Phoebe said. She smiled and threw

up her arms. "But after I finish breakfast I am going to get some work done, hurricane or no hurricane."

"We'll see," Ben said as he hurried into the kitchen.

Phoebe turned off her flashlight as she entered the living room. Sharon and Ben had set out emergency candles and oil lamps the night before. One of the old-fashioned glass lamps and two disposable wick-and-oil liquid candles were lit. Paige was kneeling in front of the boom box next to the coffee table. She had the sound turned down while she tried to find a station.

"What number was that, Agnes?" Paige asked.

"Ninety-two point something or other," Agnes replied as she rubbed Poncho with the towel and smiled at Phoebe. "Pick your spot, Phoebe. We're settling in for the duration. We can even play dominoes on this nice, big coffee table."

Phoebe sat in one of two armchairs that faced the unshuttered front windows. She put the file folder and pen on the end table between the chairs instead of cluttering up the coffee table that sat in the space between a love seat and the sofa.

"Wait . . . here's something," Paige said when a male voice came through the boom box speakers.

"—a category two as it moves toward us,

Eileen," the male commentator was saying. "George is blowing with steady gusts of one hundred and five miles per hour."

"We've only been experiencing the outer bands over the past few hours, Gary," Eileen said calmly. "This storm will get a lot worse before it gets better, and it will get worse soon. So everyone, please, stay in your homes or get to a shelter as soon as possible."

"Our phone lines are open," Gary said. "If anyone needs emergency assistance, we'll see what we can do to help."

"And please call in to report hazards," Eileen added. "Downed power lines . . ."

Paige lowered the sound so they could hear the broadcast but still talk.

Phoebe stared out the front window as the first light of a stormy dawn began to dispel the darkness.

"We've got coffee!" Sharon said brightly as she walked in with a tray of coffee mugs, spoons, napkins, powdered creamer, and sugar. She set it on the coffee table. "Help yourselves."

"That looks great," Phoebe said as she picked up a mug. She glanced at her folder and began composing a response to "Buried in Buckshot" in her head.

"There's only one good thing about hurricanes," Margaret said as she came in with two boxes of assorted doughnuts. "They're a darn good excuse to eat doughnuts."

"Thank you, Margaret," Piper said. She reached into the box for an apple-cinnamon pastry. "I was desperate for a good excuse."

Agnes leaned closer to Phoebe, shielding her mouth with her hand. "Margaret doesn't need an excuse, and she could do with a few less doughnuts," she whispered loudly.

"Agnes Finney!" Margaret said, glaring at her neighbor. "Are you implying that I'm overweight?"

Agnes looked shocked. "You couldn't possibly have heard what I just said, Margaret. You're as good as deaf!"

"That's a fact," Piper mumbled.

Margaret's head snapped around to stare at Piper, but she wasn't angry. She looked amazed. "I heard that plain as day. Every word. 'That's a fact!'"

"The salve must be working," Sharon said.

"Yes!" Margaret grinned. "That's the only possible explanation."

Phoebe had to agree. The medicinal salve Margaret used to improve her hearing had some mild magical properties. Apparently, the storm had acted as a catalyst, kicking the substance into a potent magical mode.

"It's a miracle!" Sharon exclaimed. Her eyes gleamed with a zealous light.

Ben's face fell when he saw his wife's expression. He knew that Sharon could never be convinced to give up her magical practices now.

Phoebe felt bad for him, but quickly shrugged it off. After all, it wasn't her problem.

"It's magic," Margaret whispered.

"Poppycock," Agnes muttered.

I wish, Phoebe thought as she tried to gauge her sisters' reactions. Piper sipped her coffee, content to listen and not get involved. Paige, however, had a personal interest in the Grants' situation. Sharon's addiction to folk remedies was why Ben had asked Paige for help in the first place.

"You should wash that cream off right now, Margaret," Paige said. "We don't know why your hearing suddenly got better, so we don't know if it could suddenly get *worse*, maybe worse than it has ever been."

Paige was trying to protect the cantankerous woman without exposing her own magical identity. It wasn't working, Phoebe realized with dismay.

"That makes sense, if you believe in mumbo jumbo," Agnes said. She clutched Poncho and fluffed the hair on the top of the poodle's head. "Maybe you should listen to her, Margaret."

Paige reframed her argument to appeal to Margaret's beliefs. "What if the storm has something to do with your hearing improving, like Donna getting revenge for the desecrated dead back in 1960?"

"But I haven't harmed anyone. I'm just grouchy," Margaret said. She wasn't going to

budge, and Paige gave up trying to convince her.

Phoebe wasn't thrilled with the impasse, but decided it wasn't her place to press. Margaret's improved hearing might be the only storm-enhanced magical incident. It wasn't likely, but she could hope.

A strong gust of wind slammed into the house, dispersing a scattershot of dirt and debris. A moment later one of the Grants' azalea bushes was pulled from the ground and whipped away into the gloomy light.

Sharon's elation over Margaret's good fortune faded. "I hope we have some shrubbery left when this is over," she said to her husband.

"We can replace a few bushes, Sharon," Ben said. He picked up his video camera and moved to the window to get a good shot of the storm. "This is unbelievable."

"How long will the storm last?" Paige asked.

"The eye should reach us in a couple of hours," Ben said. He kept the camera rolling. "So the actual hurricane will probably have passed by tonight."

"But the bad weather won't stop," Margaret added. "We'll have a lot of rain for another day or two."

"It's quite eerie," Agnes added, "with the ground carpeted in green leaves and trees down every which way. Margaret will be able to start a whole new rock garden with the boulders she digs out of the roots."

Margaret smiled. "I might just do that."

Ben turned off the camera. "Maybe Sharon and I should start a rock garden. I love the way yours looks, Margaret—cultivated, but with an essence of abandon."

"First I want you to start on the storage shelves and cabinets you promised to build in the garage," Sharon said testily.

Phoebe noted this additional insight into the couple's difficulties, but she had no desire to intrude. Instead she thought about the letters she was considering for her column. The man married to "Buried in Buckshot" had turned down a good job in a metropolitan area, stranding her in a small town. The man married to "Lost in Boston" had taken a more lucrative position, stranding her in a big city. "Buried" wanted a career she couldn't have in a rural community. "Lost" missed her friends and the day-care business she had given up to support her husband's career move.

"You're a million miles away, Phoebe," Agnes said, breaking into her thoughts. "Is something wrong?"

"What? Hmmm?" Phoebe snapped back to the present.

"She's all right," Piper said. She blew on her coffee to cool it down. "That's Phoebe's 'I'm working' look."

"At least she heard you, Agnes," Paige teased. "Sometimes Phoebe doesn't answer us at all."

"Because you guys don't think I'm really working," Phoebe taunted back.

"We just know how much you love it," Piper said as she set her cup down.

Phoebe really wanted to retreat to a quiet corner, but her desire to write seemed to be at war with her worry over Agnes's fate. However, at the moment that internal struggle was pointless. Agnes was safely inside the house, and Poncho had already had a morning outing.

"You talked me into it," Phoebe said, rising. "I'll be upstairs if you need me."

"Why don't you use the desk in the master bedroom instead," Ben suggested. "The ground floor is safer if a tree comes down on the house."

"Heaven forbid!" Agnes said.

"Good point," Phoebe said. She grabbed her files, coffee cup, and another doughnut as she headed out of the room. "It's okay to interrupt me with more coffee."

"I'll swing by in a bit," Ben said. He raised the video camera and recorded her exit.

Once she was alone and able to put Agnes's safety out of her mind, Phoebe's creative abilities clicked into gear. She thought about "Buried in Buckshot" and her problem for a long time, until she finally had to concede that there wasn't an ideal solution. Based on the information in the letter, "Buried in Buckshot" had to choose between staying with her husband or striking

out on her own to start a career. Phoebe wrote down what she wanted to say. She'd worry about how to say it later, after she found an answer for "Lost in Boston."

"Ready for more coffee?" Ben said, standing in the doorway with a steaming pot.

"Your timing is perfect," Phoebe said. She held out her cup. "How's everyone doing out there? I feel a little guilty about not being more sociable."

"We're gearing up for another game of dominoes." Ben sighed. A worried frown creased his brow as he poured coffee into Phoebe's mug. "Sharon hopes it will take Piper's and Paige's minds off the storm."

"Are they that worried?" Phoebe asked, surprised. The Charmed Ones had faced down treacherous demons and other evils, which had posed more of a threat than Hurricane George.

"They're more edgy than worried," Ben said. "Piper keeps looking out the window, and I know she isn't waiting for someone to drop by."

No, Phoebe thought. *Her husband can beam in. No need to watch the front door for Leo.*

"And Paige is glued to the radio, waiting for the latest reports," Ben went on. "She's obsessed with the storm."

"She does have a tendency to throw her whole self into a new project," Phoebe said.

Ben laughed. "You're right. I'd forgotten that

Paige tackles everything with gusto."

Phoebe's smile faded as Ben walked out. She suspected that her sisters felt vulnerable because they couldn't use their powers. She certainly felt like her hands were tied, but the risk of creating a magical maelstrom was just too great. On the plus side, they didn't seem to have any current problems that required magic to solve.

I just have to find a workable solution for "Lost in Boston," Phoebe thought as she chewed on the end of her pen and stared at the shuttered window, thinking.

Phoebe had no idea how much time had passed when she finally put down her pen. The hardest part of writing her column was coming up with good advice. That part was finally finished. "Lost" could have her husband, the career she had forfeited, and friends. They would just be new friends: people she met as a day-care volunteer at the local hospital or at the community college, where she could take courses to become an accredited child-care professional.

Now comes the second-hardest part, Phoebe thought as she slipped her notes back into the file folder. She had to put her advice into witty prose and somehow not sound preachy or judgmental. *But I'll give my brain a break first,* she decided, standing up and leaving the room.

Phoebe knew something was wrong the instant she walked into the living room. "What happened? Did Margaret lose her hearing again?" She asked the small group.

"No," Sharon said, shaking her head and wringing her hands. "We lost Agnes."

Phoebe froze, stricken with numbing guilt.

"Poncho was whining to go out," Ben explained. "The eye is passing over us, so it's a little bit calmer outside, and Agnes promised not to go too far. I didn't see any harm in letting her go."

Because I didn't warn you, Phoebe thought. She had chosen to write in solitude instead of coping with the distractions and protecting Agnes. Being a Charmed One had to take precedence over everything—her work and even her family—when the fate of the world hung in the balance. Her first duty was always to protect the Innocents, and she had betrayed that magical trust.

"She's only been gone twenty minutes," Paige said offhandedly. "Can't we track her?"

Piper didn't even bother to offer a solution.

"I tried that," Ben said. He gripped his mouth and chin with his hand. "Her footprints just end . . . like she was there and then a second later she wasn't."

Shock and guilt had plunged Phoebe into a void of immobility. She hated herself for allowing her mortal career to override her Charmed

destiny. But that wouldn't save Agnes, if Agnes could still be saved.

"Agnes was trapped in a gray mist inside the hurricane," Phoebe said, forcing the words to form. "Then she just vanished. I saw it. It's my fault."

Chapter Eight

"Saw it like in a *dream*?" Paige asked Phoebe with a pointed stare. A dream was easier to explain than a vision.

"A dream, yes." Phoebe nodded stiffly. She was tense, and her eyes began to glaze over. She looked like she was on the verge of becoming catatonic.

This is not good, Paige thought. Phoebe had formed an instant bond with Agnes and felt responsible for the old woman's welfare. She probably thought she had failed her primary duty as a Charmed One because Agnes was missing. It was completely out of character for her sister to buckle in the wake of a mistake, but Phoebe definitely seemed to be retreating from the consequences.

"If Agnes doesn't get back soon, she'll be caught in the back bands of the storm," Ben said. "There's no way she and that little dog can survive the violence of what's coming."

"Can I use the phone to call my husband?" Piper asked. When no one answered, she shrugged and went into the kitchen.

"How long before the eye moves past us?" Sharon asked.

"That depends on how big it is," Ben said.

"The man on the radio said the center of the eye would take just over an hour to pass over," Paige said, "but we don't know how far off center we are. We may only have a few minutes before the storm clobbers us again."

"Unless we stall the storm," Margaret said. "I know a spell. I use it when bad weather comes up suddenly and I—"

"Forget it," Ben snapped. "We don't have time for—"

"We don't have time to argue, Ben," Sharon said, cutting him off. "Margaret's magic made her hearing better, so why not let her try to stall the storm? Unless you've got a better idea."

"No, I don't." Ben sighed. He seemed hesitant to sanction using a spell. *Probably because he doesn't want to encourage Sharon's dabbling in the craft,* Paige thought. But on the other hand, he didn't have a plan for saving Agnes, so he couldn't really argue.

"Okay," Ben finally surrendered with a shrug. "I don't think a spell will help, but it can't hurt."

Paige flinched at the false assumption. Using magic during the hurricane could cause grave harm. *Although it might not,* Paige reminded herself. *So I can't interfere.*

"What do we do?" Ben asked.

"Sharon and I have to get a few things," Margaret said. "Go clear a space in the garage near the door."

Paige suddenly found herself pulled by two sides of an internal conflict. Last night Sharon and Margaret had made it clear with their butt-out incantation that she should mind her own business. She had neither the desire nor the time to interfere in anything they wanted to do. She had her own issues to worry about. Getting Phoebe back on track was infinitely more important, as it was essential to preserving the Power of Three, the foundation of her magical existence. The obvious way to save Phoebe was to find Agnes, and stalling the storm seemed to be the only way to make a rescue remotely possible.

"C'mon, Phoebe. Snap out of it." Paige spoke through gritted teeth as she took her sister's arm. "Piper!"

"Be there in a minute!" Piper called out from the kitchen. "The circuits are busy."

"Great." Paige exhaled with exasperation as she pulled Phoebe toward the garage. Her sister didn't resist.

Phoebe's withdrawal was more troubling than Paige had realized at first. They had lost Innocents before. Not often, but it happened. They always felt wretched, but the sense of failure was offset by the knowledge that so many

had been saved. They mourned, recovered, and moved on.

This was different. Paige wondered if the unpredictable interaction of magic and tempest could have set up the conditions that had made Phoebe neglect Agnes in the first place. Were those same factors causing misguided guilt to overpower Phoebe's personal strengths?

Paige wanted Piper's opinion, but Piper was fixated on Leo and Wyatt in the extreme. Which, now that she thought about it, was also odd. Was that the weirdness Leo had sensed? She filed the question away as she entered the garage and saw Ben, who wasn't clearing the space in front of the door. He was zipping up a rain slicker.

"Wait, Ben!" Paige sat Phoebe on a lawn chair and hurried over to the man. He was clearly distraught. "You can't go out there."

"I have to," Ben said. "Agnes wouldn't be lost if I had used my head. I should have either stopped her or gone with her."

"Making a second stupid mistake won't fix the first one," Paige said. She was deliberately blunt. If Ben wanted to risk his life by going out in a hurricane that was his business—unless it threatened the preservation of the Power of Three, which was her business. Casting a storm spell was risky enough. She didn't want Sharon using more magic to make up for her husband's recklessness. "If you get caught outside when

the back bands hit, you could be killed. Think about Sharon," she said sternly. "Now take off the slicker and help me move this stuff."

Paige picked up a small potted palm and carried it to the back of the garage. Ben hesitated in the doorway, but he finally gave in to his better judgment and took the rain gear off.

When Ben began moving the furniture, Paige turned her attention back to Phoebe. The pain in Phoebe's tormented brown eyes was a good sign. Her sister's emotions hadn't completely shut down.

"Listen to me, Phoebe," Paige said firmly. "We're going to find Agnes."

Phoebe blinked.

"We are going to find her," Paige repeated, gripping Phoebe's shoulders. "What happened is not your fault."

Phoebe nodded, slowly, as though the effort required enormous energy. "All my fault . . ."

"No! There *is* something weird going on, just like Leo said. Something about the hurricane." That was just a theory, but if it brought Phoebe to her senses, Paige didn't care if it was true or not. "The storm did it. Not you."

Tears filled Phoebe's eyes. "She just vanished, Paige. She might be beyond our reach."

"She might not," Paige said firmly. She checked her relief—Phoebe was coming out of her daze, but there was no guarantee it would last. Giving her something else to think about

might help. "Margaret and Sharon are going to cast a spell to stall the storm."

Phoebe frowned. "We can't use magic."

"I know, but we can't stop Sharon and Margaret without using *our* powers." Paige kept her voice down so Ben couldn't overhear. She let go of Phoebe's shoulders. "Margaret's hearing got better, not worse, so I'm hoping their elemental magic will work rather than create havoc."

"I hope so too," Phoebe said softly.

Paige didn't mention that the storm had had a bad effect on Phoebe, an extremely powerful witch, but that supported her wishful theory about folk magic. They were between the proverbial rock and a hard place: The Power of Three seemed doomed if Agnes wasn't found alive, but only maybe-doomed if Sharon and Margaret cast a practitioner's spell. Maybe-doomed was the better choice under the circumstances.

"We have to watch everything they do, Phoebe," Paige said. "If something goes wrong, we'll need to know the details to repair the damage—provided the damage can be repaired."

"Life would be so much easier if Sharon hadn't given up painting," Ben grunted as he inched a concrete bench across the floor.

"Go help him, Paige," Phoebe said. "I'll be okay."

Nodding, Paige went to help Ben. "Why did

Sharon give up art? She's talented enough to have a career in it."

"That was the plan when she quit the restaurant," Ben said. He gripped one end of the narrow table that normally sat on the veranda. "There are sidewalk art shows every weekend all over the state. She could be doing something she loves and probably making enough money to cover her show and travel expenses."

"But?" Paige asked as she picked up the other end of the table.

"She lost interest in painting when she took up folk medicine," Ben replied. He glanced at the cleared area near the door. "And now we're encouraging her to stick with potions and spells instead of going back to her palette and brushes. I know this is a special circumstance, but—"

They stopped talking when Sharon and Margaret came in.

"Do you still have that carpenter's chalk you used to mark the floor for the cabinets, Ben?" Sharon asked.

"I'll get it," Ben said.

Paige pulled a lawn chair up beside Phoebe. "This should be interesting."

Phoebe just nodded.

"You'll have to do the drawing, Margaret," Sharon said. "My hands have been itchy all day, and now I've got a blister."

"Your bacon grease hand cream probably

went sour," Ben said, handing the chalk to Margaret.

"No doubt," Paige muttered. She leaned forward when Margaret bent down and began drawing a pentagram on the cement floor. When she finished the basic power pattern, she drew a circle in the middle. Then Sharon handed her a map.

Paige wanted to ask what they were doing, but decided against it. Margaret needed to concentrate on the spell. The winds beyond the garage door were starting to pick up again. When Margaret stood up, Paige realized she had drawn a map in the circle, most likely of the immediate neighborhood where Agnes had vanished.

Margaret handed the chalk to Sharon and took a piece of ginger root from her pocket. She chewed for a minute then spit some of the juice into the cup of her hand. She bent down again, dipped a finger in the juice, and traced the circle with her finger. When she had covered the entire circle, she stepped out of the chalked diagram and walked out the garage door.

"Southwest is that way!" Sharon yelled to Margaret and pointed to the left.

Margaret nodded and moved several feet from the door, then spit more of the ginger root juice in the direction of the approaching storm.

Paige's mouth fell open. She had never used a spitting spell. She hoped it would work.

As soon as she was sure it was safe, she would fake a headache, lock the guest room door, and sneak out to search for Agnes. If she encountered an emergency situation, she could take her chances and orb.

"Dead?" Piper said incredulously as she stared at the basic phone Sharon had plugged in to replace the cordless, which required electricity. "Half an hour of 'all the circuits are busy,' and now you're dead?" She slammed the cheap receiver down on its nonelectric cradle and glared at it.

Sharon had warned her that downed trees and power poles could take out the phone lines, but Piper had hoped to get through to Leo before it happened.

"So it's back to the old reliable holler." Piper checked to make sure no one had come back from the amateur spell session in the garage, then stood in the dining room doorway to call as loudly as she dared. "Leo!"

"Yes?" She heard Leo's voice behind her.

Piper turned to see her husband standing in the kitchen. "How long have you been there?"

"About five seconds." Leo grinned. "I couldn't get Daryl and Shelia to babysit until this afternoon, but they're there now and they'll stay as long as we need them."

"Is that a good idea?" Piper asked. "Wyatt just started to adjust to having me gone. Having

both of us gone might be too much for him to handle."

"He'll be fine," Leo said. "Besides, without a crying baby I can stay silently out of sight here."

"That's true," Piper said. She heard something click on the hard floor. She looked down to see half a dozen huge roaches scurry out from under the pantry door. Oddly, there was something more revolting about a swarm of giant bugs than a hoard of hideous demons. She jumped toward Leo with a yelp.

"What?" Leo looked toward the door to the dining room in alarm. They would never be able to explain his presence if someone saw him.

"Bugs! Let's go upstairs." Piper grabbed Leo's arm. "No one will bother us in the guest room. They're afraid of getting crushed if a tree falls through the roof."

"Where are Paige and Phoebe?" Leo asked, still planted to the floor.

"Last time I saw them, they were headed for the garage," Piper said. She saw another large bug crawl out of a cabinet. "Upstairs, Leo. Now!"

Leo orbed them into the hallway by the art studio door. "Where's the guest room?"

"Down here." Piper glanced over the railing to make sure the coast was clear before moving down the hall.

Leo paused before following her into the room. "That's the biggest fern I've ever seen."

Piper stepped back into the hall to take a look. Sharon had placed the potted fern outside her husband's office the night before. She had told Paige that the plant would protect the house from the hurricane, but she hadn't told Paige that the two-foot fronds would grow to six feet overnight.

"It's three times bigger than it was yesterday," Piper said. "Could the storm do that?"

"Storms don't affect magical properties that are in a natural state," Leo said, casting a sidelong glance at Piper. "But a spell might alter the atmosphere of the surroundings so that normal parameters would no longer apply."

"Don't look at me!" Piper folded her arms across her chest. "I have not uttered a magical word or made a magical move since I saved Margaret from the forklift."

"Well, somebody's done something," Leo said as he moved into the guest room.

Piper closed the door behind them. She didn't want to talk about giant plants. She threw her arms around Leo's neck and planted a huge kiss on his lips. "You have no idea how much I've missed you."

Leo returned the kiss, but then pushed her away. "We have to get Paige and Phoebe."

"I'd rather be alone with you," Piper said, trying to press closer. "Didn't you miss me?"

"I still do," Leo said, holding her at arm's length. "You're not acting like my Piper."

Piper glared at him. "I've done nothing but think about you since last night!" She sputtered with incensed hurt.

"What about before last night?" Leo asked.

"You're always on my mind," Piper said.

"But not exclusively. Something's going on, and it's making you act weird." Leo forced her to sit on the bed. "I'm going to get Paige and Phoebe. Don't move until I get back."

"I'll be waiting." Piper batted her eyes, then pounded the bed with her fist when Leo orbed out. He usually couldn't resist when she turned on the playful, coquettish charm.

Phoebe fought to stay alert when everyone returned to the living room. Her despair over Agnes's fate was like an anchor, dragging her down into a deep, dark gloom. Talking took too much energy. She could only sit and listen.

"How will we know if the spell worked?" Paige asked.

"I'm not sure," Margaret said. "I use it so I have time to protect my gardens. I always finish before the spell fades away and the bad weather rolls in."

"I guess time will tell," Ben said. Sharon shot him an annoyed look. "Seriously. The radio reporter said it would take about an hour for the center of the eye to pass over. It's been an hour. If time continues to pass and everything outside is still calm, Margaret's little ritual probably worked."

"That's good thinking, Ben," Sharon said, smiling a silent apology. "Does anyone want tea or snacks while we wait?"

"Rest a minute first, Sharon," Margaret said, patting the couch cushion beside her. "We have to consider the possibility that Agnes won't find her way back."

"She won't have to find her way," Ben said. "I'm going out to look for her."

"No, you're not," Margaret said evenly, without her usual edge of bossy teacher gruffness. She was resolutely sober and serious. "Poncho knows where he lives, and he knows how to find your house. If they can move, he'll show Agnes the way home."

"Margaret has a point, Ben," Paige said.

Phoebe caught her sister's eye. They both knew it was futile for Ben to risk going outside. Paige had magical resources that might help her find the missing woman; Ben would only be putting himself in peril.

"If she can't move, she's probably hurt," Sharon said. "A tree could have fallen on her."

"If she's hurt, Poncho will come get us," Margaret countered. A few seconds later she spoke again. "A sinkhole could have opened up under them or the ground could have collapsed and dropped them into an underground cave."

"We'd never find her if something like that happened," Ben said. He sank into one of the armchairs.

"And we won't find her if a skunk ape kidnapped her or if she stumbled into a devil's doorway and was swept into another dimension," Margaret added.

You're closer to the truth than you know, Phoebe thought.

"I'll never forgive myself if—" Ben's voice cracked with emotion, and the sentence was left dangling. He clung to the hand Sharon offered in support.

You didn't know she was destined to get lost, Ben, Phoebe thought. *I did, and I left instead of watching her.*

The weight of Phoebe's guilt was crushing, and the only relief was to retreat into the dark recesses of her mind, where she didn't have to think or remember.

While Margaret and Sharon were busy comforting Ben, Paige slipped out of the room. She had glanced into the kitchen when they came in from the garage. Piper wasn't there. When she didn't find her oldest sister in the master bedroom, she assumed Piper had summoned Leo again. The upstairs was the only place they could meet without fear of being seen.

Paige bounded up the stairs and came to an abrupt stop outside the guest room door. The fern on the hall floor had grown into a gigantic plant. Eight-foot fronds touched the ceiling and twined in the railing spindles. She didn't sense

any direct danger, but the evidence of more magic gone awry was unsettling. The plant should be immune to the hurricane's magical disruption effects, unless someone had cast a spell on it. Paige sighed and turned the doorknob to the guest room.

Inside, she found Piper pouting on the bed, but there was no sign of Leo. "What are you doing up here, Piper? You're such a nervous Nellie about the hurricane, I can't believe you're huddled up here waiting for falling trees."

"I'm waiting for Leo," Piper said. "He went to look for you and Phoebe."

"So he *is* here," Paige said. "Where?"

"Somewhere out of sight," Piper replied with a pointed stare. "He won't come back until he finds you."

"I'm going back downstairs, then," Paige said, and left quickly. Her sisters' single-minded behavior was becoming more extreme. She hoped Leo knew how to correct the problem. If not, the Power of Three might become another victim of Hurricane George.

Paige walked back through the master bedroom looking for Leo, then dashed through the utility room to check the garage. Leo wasn't there, but Ben had left the garage door open in case Agnes came back.

The daylight still had an eerie yellow green cast, and a drizzling rain hung in the air. It looked like massive roots from several trees had

broken through the cement driveway, but the winds had not picked up. Margaret's spell had stalled the storm. Unfortunately, nobody knew when the spell would wear off. Paige had no way to gauge how long the calm would last. She needed to find Leo to get answers and to ask him for help finding Agnes. They were both orb-equipped, and it would take less time to find her with two people searching.

Paige entered the dining room, and found Leo standing by the same doorway she had used to eavesdrop on Margaret and Sharon the night before. He looked relieved to see her.

"Is Phoebe in the living room?" Leo asked in a whisper.

"Yes, but Agnes, the old lady, took her dog out when the eye passed over, and she got lost in the storm," Paige explained. "Phoebe saw it in a vision, but she didn't tell us and she feels responsible. She isn't coping very well."

Leo frowned. "What does that mean?"

"She's withdrawn and inconsolable. I think the storm is affecting her—" Paige stopped talking midsentence at the sound of Sharon's voice.

"You are not going out there, Ben," Sharon said.

Leo had instantly begun to orb out, but Paige stayed where she was. Sensing that, Leo orbed back a moment later.

"What are you doing?" Leo whispered.

"I have to be sure Sharon can keep Ben in the

house," Paige explained. "We might not have time to look for *two* missing Innocents." She motioned him to be quiet.

"Margaret's reasoning is sound," Ben said. "But it ignores the fact that Agnes could be close by, and I *might* find her."

"You're forgetting what Margaret said about the spell," Sharon countered.

Leo's head snapped toward Paige, his eyes wide and questioning.

Paige held a hand up, asking for patience.

"It won't stall the storm forever," Sharon went on, "and you won't have any warning before the hurricane winds hit again. You're staying inside. Get the crab dip from the red cooler."

"You're right." Ben sighed. He slammed the cooler lid open in frustration.

"I'll get the crackers," Sharon said dismissively and walked toward the pantry.

Leo nudged Paige and pointed up. She motioned for him to wait. Sharon might notice the illumination of an orb in the dark, shuttered dining room. She heard Sharon open the pantry door, then a second later Sharon screamed and bolted through the dining room as a swarm of large cockroaches poured out of the cupboard.

Paige grabbed Leo and orbed. She could only hope that Sharon's terror was so great she wouldn't notice the last sparkles of shimmering blue light. If she did, maybe she and Margaret would assume it was the same "ghost" Margaret

had seen the first night Leo had orbed in to see Piper.

Piper was ecstatic when they materialized in the guest room. She smiled and leaped off the bed to hug her husband. "Leo!"

"Not now, Piper," Leo said. He pulled her arms away and stared at Paige. "What just happened?"

"Leo!" Piper said sharply.

"In a minute, please." Leo stifled the argument with a warning look. "This is important."

"*One* minute," Piper said, sitting back down on the bed.

"Sharon must have put another bug repellent talisman in the pantry after I left last night," Paige said. "It obviously backfired."

"A talisman." Leo exhaled and took a second to compose his thoughts. "Then the Charmed Ones aren't the only witches in the house?"

"A brilliant deduction," Paige said. She smiled tightly, and then spoke quickly to pack as much explanation as possible into one minute. "We tried to stop Sharon and Margaret from using their folk magic without blowing our cover, but they thought I was meddling and didn't know what I was talking about, so they wouldn't listen, and now the storm is mucking everything up. This house isn't old enough to have that many big bugs accumulate naturally."

"Bugs seek shelter in hurricanes just like everything else," Leo said. "Houses are havens."

"That may be," Paige agreed, "but they're concentrated in the pantry because the charm that's supposed to repel them is attracting them instead. There's a fern in the upstairs hall with delusions of grandeur. It wants to be a one-plant jungle."

"I saw that," Leo said. He ran his hand over his hair and exhaled again. Piper grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him down beside her.

"I'm going to get Phoebe," Paige said. "Make your wife happy for the next couple of minutes so she doesn't throw a fit when we go out to find Agnes."

Paige didn't give Leo time to argue or respond. She raced out of the room, hoping everyone was too worried about the missing neighbor to realize that Phoebe was seriously traumatized.

Paige found her sister still sitting on the sofa, staring blankly into space. Margaret, Sharon, and Ben were gone. Since Phoebe wasn't in immediate danger, she went to the garage to see if Ben had decided to resume his rescue mission. He just wasn't the type of man who could turn over the fate of an old lady to a dog and a spell.

Ben, Sharon, and Margaret were in the garage, but they weren't arguing about Ben's stubborn determination to be a hero. The garage door was closed, and they were staring

through the rectangular, eye-level windows.

"Where have you been, Paige?" Sharon asked when she entered the garage.

"Upstairs with Piper," Paige said. "She's pretty rattled, and we don't have to worry about falling trees as long as the calm holds. What's going on here?"

"Alligators," Ben said.

Startled, Paige glanced outside. Three alligators ranging in size from four to six feet were pressed against the door.

"We got here just in time," Margaret said. She shuddered and moved to her left. "Otherwise, they'd be in the house."

The alligator nearest Margaret's position mirrored her movement on the far side of the door. Paige quickly deduced that the mugwort Margaret put in her shoes to ward off wild beasts was having the same reverse effect as the bug-repelling charm: It was attracting the alligators. She didn't say a word. At least the huge reptiles were preventing Ben from going out into the storm.

"I'm going to take Phoebe upstairs," Paige said. "Maybe she'll get some sleep. That's the only thing that will get her mind off of Agnes for a while."

"Okay," Sharon said without looking away from the alligators. "Look! There's another one," she said as another reptile approached.

Paige ran back into the living room. Phoebe

was listless and didn't want to move, so Paige orbed her into the guest bedroom.

"That was quick," Piper said when her sisters swirled into the room on magic light particles. She had been nuzzling Leo's neck while he droned on about putting business before pleasure in an emergency. In her mind she hadn't forgotten or forsaken her responsibilities—she couldn't use her powers during the hurricane. But she was just beginning to realize that a magical crisis was brewing.

"You promised to focus, Piper," Leo warned as he extricated himself from her embrace.

"I know," Piper said. She wasn't happy, but she was a witch of her word. Even when, as Leo had just pointed out, "her good sense had been completely compromised by a magical anomaly." Paige helped Phoebe over to the rollaway and sat her down.

"She's exhausted," Piper said as Phoebe wrapped herself around the bed pillow.

"And feeling really low," Paige added.

When a creaking sound came from the door, Leo dropped to the floor to hide under the bed.

"It's just the fern," Piper said, pointing toward the tips of several fronds that were forcing their way between the door and the jamb. "We'll need a machete to hack our way out of here in another hour."

"An army of alligators is amassing outside

the garage door," Paige reported. "Which is helping us, odd as that may seem. Ben can't get out, and Margaret and Sharon are totally preoccupied."

Leo stood up and dusted off his jeans. "I think it's safe to assume that there's an unprecedented amount of magical power concentrated in this one house right now. All of nature's potential to distort and disrupt it is being directed here through the hurricane."

"Are you saying that our being here is causing the amplified effects?" Paige asked Leo. "Like a jinx?"

"A hurricane hex," Piper said.

"More or less," Leo agreed.

Paige sat on the rollaway and shook Phoebe's shoulder. "Leo's here to get Agnes back, Phoebe. Pay attention."

Phoebe blinked.

That's better than nothing, Piper thought. Leo had explained that Phoebe wasn't aware of much going on around her. Her desire to save Agnes was all that kept her tethered to reality.

"Your powers are acting like a magnet," Leo said. He scowled and rubbed his chin. "The storm is affecting Sharon and Margaret's benign folk magic as though it's as powerful as yours, but the results are erratic. Margaret's hearing got better, but the bug-away charm became a come-on-in beacon."

"Agnes," Phoebe whispered.

"Phoebe saw her wandering in a gray calm holding her dog, Poncho," Paige told Leo. "Then they were just gone."

"It sounds like Agnes might be caught in a small pocket of distorted reality," Leo said.

"She was lost." Phoebe's whispered words were barely audible, but she had fought off the storm-induced trauma enough to connect with the discussion. "Stray sod."

"What's that?" Paige asked.

"Something Phoebe and I were discussing last night before you came upstairs," Piper said. "Margaret told me about islands made of peat that float around Florida swamps, and Phoebe thought that was similar to a Celtic myth about stray sod."

Leo nodded. "Patches of magical grass that disorient whoever steps on them," he said.

"There are swamps and bogs in this forest," Paige pointed out. "Is it possible the weird magic that's running amok in the house followed Agnes when she took the dog out?"

"That would explain the first part of Phoebe's vision," Leo said. "Then, when Margaret cast the spell to hold the eye in place, a magical storm surge could have swept Agnes into a rift in our reality—where we won't be able to find her."

Piper saw Phoebe flinch. "Why not, Leo?" Paige asked.

"I won't be able to sense her, and Paige won't be able to see or hear her," he replied. His frown

deepened, and he looked up suddenly. "Have the effects of the stall spell started to wear off yet?"

Paige shook her head. "No. Nothing's changed between the time I looked for you in the garage and when I saw the alligators a few minutes ago."

"What does that mean for us?" Piper asked.

"That the problem is probably worse than a missing woman and her dog," Leo said bluntly.

Even Phoebe raised her eyes to stare at him questioningly.

"Your powers are too potent to risk using," Leo said, "except as a last resort. Margaret has to break the stall spell. Theoretically, Agnes and Poncho are anomalies that should be ejected from the rift before it closes."

"Then you'd be able to sense her," Piper stated.

"I'm not sure," Leo admitted. "The storm would resume its natural course and the flaws in reality would be repaired, but the area around this house would still be contaminated by distorted magic. That could confuse my senses and compromise my ability to find her quickly."

"But you could find her eventually," Piper said, looking to Leo for confirmation. "It might just take longer."

Leo nodded with a shrug, but the gestures only confirmed that he wasn't certain. Then his lips tightened, a warning of more bad news to

come. "The back end of a hurricane is always worse than the leading edge. And the longer the eye is stalled, the greater the force building up behind it will be."

"And?" Piper prodded.

"If Margaret can't get the hurricane moving soon, Agnes and her dog won't be the only casualties," Leo said. "The back bands could flatten the house, killing us all."

Chapter Nine

While Leo and Piper got Phoebe settled back in the living room, Paige returned to the garage. She arrived just in time to see one of the Grants' azaleas rip through the cement floor, burst into a splendor of nonseasonal pink blooms, and wrap around Sharon's leg.

"Get it off!" Sharon shrieked and stamped her foot.

Ben grabbed a hatchet off a shelf, but he couldn't get a grip on the effusive plant because of his wife's hysterical movements. "Stand still, Sharon!"

"Don't shout," Margaret begged softly. She pressed her hands over her ears and dropped to her knees. Her facial features contorted in pain. "Don't shout."

Sharon forced herself to stand quietly, tears streaming down her face, as Ben severed the azalea branch. When she was free, she dashed toward the house. Ben ran after her, dropping

the hatchet by the door on his way inside.

The branches of the azalea twined around anything they touched. Curling tendrils wove a thick pink and green mat over the garage door.

That will keep the alligators out for a while, Paige thought. She glanced at the tools hanging on the Peg-Board, spotting a pair of orange headphones lying on the workbench. The plastic and metal headpiece resembled stereo headphones and was used to dampen the noise from power tools and equipment. She grabbed it and ran over to Margaret.

"Put this on," Paige said quietly. Margaret nodded and winced, confirming Paige's diagnosis: Margaret's hearing had continued to improve and was becoming steadily more sensitive. The sonic vibration created by Sharon's shout had been painful for her. In time, if nothing reversed the process, the sound of Margaret's own breathing would become unbearable to her. Paige desperately hoped that eliminating the active folk charms and spells would starve the storm's ability to amplify magical power—and return everything to normal. Otherwise they were all doomed.

"Thanks," Margaret whispered with a weak smile. She silently accepted Paige's help, leaning on the younger woman for support as they left the garage. When they reached the living room, she held the mufflers tightly against her head and sat down.

Piper and Phoebe were seated in the armchairs. Paige assumed that Leo was hiding nearby. Phoebe still looked pale and shaken, but her eyes were focused.

"What the hell is happening around here?" Ben asked as he sat down on the sofa beside Sharon.

"We have an idea," Paige said. She stood behind the table between the armchairs.

Ben's head snapped up.

Paige chose her words carefully. She had to weave together a rational theory from bits of legend and tie it to reality with the inexplicable but undeniable evidence of the working magic around them. And she had to do it without exposing the Halliwell sisters as witches.

"We got our clues and supporting facts from everything that's been said about hurricanes and local myths over the past couple of days." Paige's gaze shifted from Margaret to Sharon and back to Margaret as she spoke. "We just wanted you to know we were paying attention in case there was a pop quiz, Margaret," she joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Margaret smiled. "I *really* want to give you an A, Paige," she whispered.

Her ability to engage in banter eased Paige's concerns about Margaret's mental state. The senior practitioner had to be functional.

"Anyway," Paige continued, "we're pretty sure the effects of all the folk medicine—the

charms and such—are being magnified and skewed by the storm."

"Think of it as Mother Nature's revenge," Piper interjected.

"Or a warning," Paige added.

"Not a bad theory. That's better than anything I've come up with," Ben said. He turned to his wife. "I told you something bad would happen if you kept messing around with this stuff, Sharon."

"What do you know about it?" Sharon demanded hotly. She glowered at Ben, then looked at Paige. "Either of you?"

Paige met Sharon's challenging gaze as she had done so many times in years past.

"*Everything* operates within defined parameters, and logic always applies, Sharon." Paige's even voice reflected her firm conviction. "But before a seemingly unsolvable problem can be solved, you have to understand the rules."

"We are not dealing with two-plus-two-equals-four type concepts here, Paige," Sharon said. She refused to give up any ground. "You have no idea—"

"Just shut up and listen, Sharon!" Margaret hissed. "You don't know as much as you think you do, and apparently, neither do I."

"But—" Sharon's protest lodged in her throat when Margaret gave her a "Don't you dare" look. She clamped her mouth closed, but she wasn't happy.

Paige didn't care if Sharon gave her credit for being right. She just needed her cooperation.

"I know that you make talismans to keep insects and mice out of your pantry, Sharon," Paige said. She was careful not to sound judgmental. "The storm reversed the charm's effects, drawing the bugs *in* rather than keeping them away."

A curious expression replaced Sharon's petulant frown. "Then my charms do work—"

Piper quickly squashed Sharon's sense of pride and accomplishment. "Yes. They work quite well. Just not well enough to avoid catastrophe."

"There are some things we aren't meant to know," Phoebe said, still staring out the window but engaging in the discussion.

"I've heard that before," Piper said, "or I read it somewhere."

"It's a theme from Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*," Margaret explained quietly.

Sharon's eyes flashed. "Dr. Frankenstein created a monster because of his *deliberate* actions. We didn't do this on purpose."

"No one's accusing you, Sharon," Paige said. "But you and Margaret have to fix this."

"Fix it?" Sharon asked, blinking. Her hostility evaporated in a rush of fear. "How are we supposed to fix it?"

Paige almost couldn't believe her ears—Sharon was at a loss and had asked for her

advice. Paige tucked the small personal triumph away to savor later, after Hurricane George and his magical mischief had blown over.

"I'm a little curious about that myself, Paige. How?" Ben reached for Sharon's hand, but she yanked it away. He was not insulted by the abrupt rejection, however, and put his arm around her shoulders. Paige knew that living with a smart and talented know-it-all wasn't easy. Love had kept Sharon and Ben together. She hoped love would see them through this crisis, too.

"Sharon has to find everything in the house that she made using magic. Charms, tonics—" Paige glanced at Sharon's hands, which were clasped in her lap. They were red and blistered. "Hand creams, everything."

"Then what?" Sharon asked.

"We have to get rid of it," Piper said. "Burning them might do the trick."

"There's firewood leftover from winter in the wood box," Ben said, gesturing toward the stone fireplace.

"Great, but let's hold off on burning anything just yet." Paige needed to first consult with Leo about their methods. They couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

"No problem. Come on, Sharon," Ben said, taking her reddened hand and standing up.

Sharon reddened with embarrassment as the results of her handiwork became clear.

The disaster was steeped in her arrogance.

"Don't bother with anything that's totally natural," Paige called after them, "like spell ingredients and the giant fern upstairs, or utensils and pots that you've cleaned. Just get the things you made."

"What do you want me to do?" Margaret asked.

"Figure out how to reverse the stall spell," Paige said. She looked at Phoebe. "We have to go to the garage. Do you want someone to stay with you?"

Phoebe shook her head. "Just find Agnes, please."

"We will." Paige squeezed Phoebe's arm, wishing she felt as confident as she sounded.

Phoebe sat still for a few seconds, taking long, deep breaths. Paige, Piper, and Leo were working to bring Agnes home. The mountain of blame dragging her down became marginally lighter. She was a Charmed One. She should help find Agnes and Poncho—but she hadn't finished her column yet.

Where are my files? Phoebe wondered. She stood up, seized with sudden anxiety. Her thoughts were hopelessly jumbled. She remembered working on the letters, riding in the car, and drinking coffee. Then something had happen to Agnes and Poncho. . . .

"Are you sure that's everything, Sharon?"

She heard Ben ask in the kitchen. He walked out and dropped two talismans on the hearth and opened the screen to the fireplace.

"Positive. We washed everything except this." Sharon handed Ben a small wooden bowl and scanned the room as though she expected something terrible to ooze from the walls. "Where did all those cockroaches go?"

"I don't know, but don't worry. We'll hire a good exterminator when this is all over." Ben pulled a folded newspaper out of the wood box and wadded it up. As he reached to stuff the paper under the grate, he jerked back.

"What on—" Sharon stumbled backward as two dozen bats flew out of the fireplace. A high-pitched whine escaped her pursed lips. "Ben!"

"Calm down," Ben said. He kept an eye on the bats' flight as he moved to Sharon's side. The winged beasts circled the space under the vaulted ceiling before landing on the chandelier. He glanced at Phoebe as he urged Sharon to move forward. "We're going to search the bedroom, Phoebe. Are you coming?"

Phoebe shook her head, but her gaze followed them as they moved away. A flash of muddled recollection both repelled her from and drew her toward the bedroom. Trapped in another irreconcilable conflict, she couldn't move. The paralyzing loop was broken when Piper stopped Ben in the hall.

"Do you have a machete, Ben?" Piper asked.

"Anything bigger or sharper than your hatchet?"

"A chainsaw," Ben said.

"Perfect," Piper said. "Sharon can finish finding her magical handiwork. Your services are needed in the garage."

Phoebe felt compelled to find her notes, but she couldn't force herself to enter the master bedroom. Work had distracted her from watching Agnes. Now Agnes was missing—

Threatened with another decline into stagnant self-recrimination, Phoebe grasped for an anchor. *Coffee.*

"Where's Leo, Phoebe?" Piper whispered, coming up behind her.

Phoebe shrugged as she walked into the kitchen. She stopped dead when Leo came in through the dining room door. He wasn't out looking for Agnes.

"You missed me, huh?" Piper winked.

Leo frowned. "I orbed out of the utility room to avoid Ben."

"Oh, come on, Leo." Piper put her hands on his chest. "Admit it. You just can't stand being away from me."

Leo removed her hands and refused to acknowledge Piper's flirtations. "How bad is the growth in the garage?"

Phoebe's gaze swept across Piper and Leo as she scanned the kitchen.

"The azalea just keeps growing," Piper said. "The tangle of branches is ten feet thick in spots,

but I'm sure Ben can cut through it with the chainsaw. The hatchet wasn't much use. Plus, I didn't want to smash the cute little lizards that are scampering through the leaves."

The conversation buzzed around Phoebe as she stepped up to the sink. Two earthenware jugs, a pestle, and a casserole dish were drying in a plastic rack. Agnes had brought peach cobbler for dessert last night. Phoebe shifted her gaze to four coffee mugs turned upside-down in the dish drainer.

"Paige is probably right about how to reverse the stall spell," Leo said.

"I hope so," Piper said, "because Margaret doesn't have a clue. How can someone practice magic for so many years and not know how to reverse a spell?"

Leo shrugged. "Apparently, most of Margaret's spells are cast to heal and protect. There's no reason to reverse them. And her other spells, like the stall spell, are designed to just lose potency and end—under normal circumstances."

Piper looked frustrated, and rubbed her temples. "You have to go check on Wyatt," she said. She made the announcement matter-of-factly, as though she were asking him to get her a glass of water. "I'm worried and that's making it impossible for me to think about anything else. I need you to go see him so you can tell me he's okay and really mean it."

"I can't leave now, Piper," Leo said. "We've barely begun trying to get things under control . . ."

Coffee, Phoebe thought. The idea of having a cup of coffee created a stabilizing foothold in the chaos that engulfed her. She reached for a mug, and when her hand brushed the cobbler dish, she was whisked into blinding whiteness.

Agnes in the center of a white void . . . holding Poncho . . . looking confused, but not terrified. The woman and the dog were not moving . . .

Staggered by the emotional jolt, Phoebe pulled her hand back. She touched one of the earthenware jugs and was instantly swept into another scenario: Sharon and Margaret in the kitchen with the pestle.

Crushed bits of hair . . . a circle of ivy inside a bowl . . . Margaret and Sharon chanting, "Bound by blood and ivy vine, these from now will only mind their own business, not yours or mine."

Phoebe snapped out of the vision with a gasp. "A spell. They did another spell . . . on us."

And Agnes is frozen somewhere beyond our time and space.

"What spell?" Leo turned toward Phoebe. She had a white-knuckle grip on the edge of the counter, and her eyes were glazed and vacant again.

"I'm not under a spell." Piper's tone was adamant.

However, once the idea had been expressed, Leo knew an undisclosed spell was the most likely explanation for the weirdness that had been troubling him. He had assumed that the hurricane had combined with Piper's and Phoebe's supercharged magical powers to create the warped personality effect. His wife loved him, but not with the single-minded mania she was exhibiting today. Phoebe was a kind and gentle soul, but her psyche was too strong to shatter under the strain of losing an Innocent. Something was manipulating their emotions.

Something like an amateur spell gone wrong, Leo thought.

Without warning, Leo pulled Piper into his arms and kissed her passionately. She melted in his embrace and pressed against him.

"Leo!" Piper cooed. "Aren't you full of surprises."

"That's not how stuffy old Leo usually acts during a calamity, is it?" Leo asked.

Piper's smile dimmed. "What's your point?"

"Unless Wyatt and I were in imminent danger, you would never be obsessed with us during a calamity either," Leo said. "Would you?"

Piper frowned. "No."

"Not unless someone had messed with your priorities," Leo said. "What was Phoebe doing when Agnes disappeared?"

"Working on her column," Piper said.

"Think about that," Leo said. "Phoebe didn't

tell you about her Agnes vision. She was writing instead of protecting an Innocent. Then, when Agnes got lost, the balance between her career and being Charmed collapsed, and the guilt pushed her into a trauma-induced emotional retreat."

Piper blinked. "Leo—I didn't know. I mean, I didn't realize what was happening—"

Leo put the brakes on Piper's guilt trip and asked another question. "Did you notice anything strange about Paige today?"

"I wasn't really paying attention, but no, I don't think so," Piper said, shrugging. "She took charge, I guess," Piper continued. She cocked her head, thinking. "Took care of Phoebe, told everyone what to do . . . and I just went along with it."

"There's a clue," Leo said pointedly. His wife wasn't a bossy alpha female, but she usually wanted to be consulted and involved in events that affected her and the family. "I think Sharon and Margaret cast a spell that directed all your attention and energies toward the most important things in your lives."

Piper looked troubled. She felt dismayed that she hadn't recognized the obvious before Leo had pointed it out. "You and Wyatt for me, work for Phoebe—"

"And magic for Paige," Leo finished. "She quit her job to learn more about the craft and being a witch. The question is: Why did Margaret and Sharon cast the spell?"

Piper folded her arms and began rocking on her heels, clearly agitated. "I don't know, Leo. I just can't help wondering if Wyatt—"

"Wyatt is fine." Leo grabbed Piper's shoulders. Thanks to whatever spell she was under she was having a hard time keeping her mind off her distant son, and he had to snap her out of it. "You're more than a wife and a mother, Piper. You're a powerful witch. That's just as important. More important sometimes. Like right now."

"Right." Piper nodded and tried to slip her arms around his waist.

"Come on, Piper!" Leo insisted with a forced whisper. "For all we know, Sharon and Margaret conjured something else that's getting ready to take out the whole state of Florida."

"What do you want me to do?" Piper asked.

"Take Phoebe into the garage, find out what spell they cast, and break it."

"Got any tips on how to do that?" Piper asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Burn whatever they used to cast it," Leo said.

"That's it?" Piper asked.

"Basic magic, basic solutions," Leo said. *Except that the hurricane is throwing all the rules out the window.* He couldn't be certain about anything regarding magic and the storm right now. Every precaution had to be taken. "You'd better burn *everything* Sharon made before Margaret reverses the stall spell," Leo advised. "The less

active magic floating around, the less chance that something else will go wrong." Leo gave Piper a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll be in the utility room if you need me."

Leo did not linger in the kitchen. The magical imperatives that were pulling Piper's strings were forcing her to make a choice between her duty as a Charmed One and her feelings for him. He didn't want to risk causing a Phoebe-type emotional implosion.

From his hiding spot behind the utility room door, Leo could hear everything that took place in the garage, the master bath, and the hall between the stairs and the master bedroom. Through a narrow window he watched as Piper, Phoebe, and Sharon convened in the garage.

Sharon carried a wooden wreath decorated with flowers and sprigs of herbs. She also had a shoe box full of glass and earthen bottles. "That fern has taken over the whole—"

"Forget the fern, Sharon," Piper said. She wasn't in the mood for unnecessary talk. "We've got bigger fish to fry."

Now that the women were busy in the garage, Leo stepped into the hallway to get a better vantage point. He needed firsthand information to properly track a situation that was in constant, erratic flux.

In the garage several azaleas had grown into trees with massive knotted trunks—and tangled branches that sported a profusion of red, white,

and pink flowers the size of wide-brimmed sun hats. Armed with a chainsaw, Ben finished clearing the plant away from the spell pattern Margaret had drawn on the floor. His expensive car was buried under a mountain of logs and brush, and he had positioned himself to cut new growth before it invaded the cleared area.

Margaret stood outside the chalked pentagram. "Are you sure this will work, Paige?"

"Logically, it should," Paige replied. "The effects of most benign spells can be negated by simply reversing how the spell was cast."

"Wait!" Piper hauled Phoebe into the garage. "Don't do anything yet." She settled Phoebe into a lawn chair and urged Sharon to join Paige and Margaret.

Leo tensed as he listened and watched. Being a passive player in an emergency was difficult, but he had absolute faith in Piper and her sisters.

"What's the matter, Piper?" Paige asked.

"Margaret and Sharon put some kind of spell on us." Piper's eyes narrowed. "Phoebe just got a clue from a jug."

"They did what?" Ben lowered the chainsaw and threw up his free hand in disgust.

Margaret and Sharon exchanged a chagrined look.

"You mean that butt-out spell they chanted in the kitchen?" Paige asked.

"You knew about it?" Piper gasped. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Because it didn't work," Paige said, then hesitated. She frowned uncertainly. "Did it?"

"I've been obsessing about my husband and Phoebe's a basket case," Piper exclaimed. "Why would you think it didn't work?"

"I thought the storm was making you act—" Paige paused, catching herself before she revealed too much about their links to magic. "Peculiar. Nerves or something."

Paige's behavior, Leo realized, hadn't deviated far from normal, which had masked the external influences. But clearly she had been affected, or else she would have mentioned the spell she had witnessed to her sisters.

Paige spun to face Sharon. "You just couldn't stand the thought that I might be right and you might be wrong, could you? Nobody is right all the time, Sharon. Nobody."

"I just wanted you to leave me alone, Paige," Sharon said. She clutched the wreath and shoe box close to her chest, but her chin jutted forward in stubborn defiance.

"You put a spell on your best friend so she would mind her own business?" Ben asked. His voice was loaded with contempt, and his expression was grave and riddled with disappointment. "She was trying to help, Sharon. Because I asked her to, and because she cares about you. How could you do such a thing?"

Leo was relieved to learn that the spell had not been cast to cover up something bigger

brewing. However, the destructive power of petty human failings was always sobering.

Sharon's defensive posture crumbled. "I'm sorry, Ben. Paige, I—" She paused, her lip trembling. "You're right. Both of you. About me, about the magic—"

"Save the soul-searching and apologies for later," Piper interrupted. "You and Margaret have to break the butt-out spell before Margaret tries to start up the storm."

"Why?" Margaret asked. Her face contorted with pain, and she repositioned the mufflers.

Leo sensed that Margaret was nervous and unsure about dissolving the stall spell. He knew what to say to bolster her confidence and courage, but he couldn't act on his instincts. Luckily Phoebe found the inner strength to take up the slack.

"Because we have to save Agnes, Margaret," Phoebe said as she walked toward the group on unsteady legs. She looked at Sharon. "Tell me how you cast the mind-your-own-business spell."

"I didn't know which hairbrush belonged to Paige," Sharon explained, "so I took hair from all the combs and brushes in the guest bathroom."

"That explains why we were all affected," Paige said.

"We cut small pieces of the hair into a bowl and bound it with a length of ivy vine," Sharon

continued. "Then we recited the incantation, and that was it."

"There's ivy in the bowl on the fireplace," Ben said.

"Burn the ivy," Piper ordered. "Then burn the bowl and the hair and the talismans." She pointed at the wreath and the shoe box in Sharon's arms. "Burn those, too."

"I'll do it right now," Sharon said, rushing into the house. Ben set down the chainsaw and ran after her.

Leo orbed himself just before the couple ran past him. He materialized on the far side of the giant azaleas in the garage. Hidden from sight by the mass of leaves and flowers, he peered through the garage door window to assess conditions outside.

The azaleas outside had also grown to wild and unimaginable proportions. The branches intertwined with the trees along the driveway, forming tunnels and a twisted labyrinth of foliage. The root-infested driveway was littered with chunks of concrete. The more extreme disruptions in the flora followed a path from the garage door down to what was left of the dirt road.

As Paige had surmised, the unchecked magic had followed Agnes from the house. The contamination had infected everything along the woman's route, and it had left a trail.

When he looked up, Leo was horrified to see that his theory about the hurricane's back bands

was also correct. Being a Whitelighter, he was sensitive to the elements. He could feel the tremendous power of nature's atmospheric forces amassing behind the stalled eye of the hurricane. When George resumed its destructive track, it would hit with devastating consequences.

Unless the Charmed Ones acted quickly.

Leo was suddenly afraid he had miscalculated how the storm had altered Margaret's stall spell. He had assumed that the wear-off mechanism had been shut down, making it necessary to reverse the spell. Now he realized there was another possibility: The wear-off mechanism might have been reversed, prolonging the spell and making it stronger. If that was the case, Margaret didn't possess nearly enough personal power to disengage the spell. In addition, bringing the spell to an abrupt halt might release the power it was accumulating in an explosive magical blast.

Only one power existed to counter the cataclysmic effects: The Power of Three.

Chapter Ten

Piper paced as Paige and Margaret reviewed the steps to reverse the stall spell. She tried to follow the discussion, but her thoughts kept returning to Wyatt and Leo. She glanced toward the house, wondering what her husband was doing.

"Watch that branch, Piper!" Paige pointed as a cluster of azalea blooms mushroomed into a four-foot-wide bouquet inches from Piper's head.

Margaret cringed, throwing her arms around her head to dampen the noise of Paige's shouted warning.

Piper eyed the chainsaw Ben had left on the floor, but she worried that the noise of the engine might be too much for Margaret to handle. She picked up the hatchet Ben had set aside and severed the stalk with a few hefty blows instead. Tightening her grip on the handle, she stood ready to beat the shrub back if it encroached farther on Margaret's chalk pentagram.

"It's not my fault, it's not my fault . . ."

Phoebe sat on the lawn chair, repeating the phrase over and over. She fought the backward slide into emotional oblivion while she waited for Sharon to break the spell.

Not an easy task, Piper thought, chopping off another elongating branch. The memory of Wyatt's tear-stained face was wreaking havoc on her nerves. The more she tried not to think about her son, the worse her anxiety got. If Leo would just orb home to check on him, he could put her mind at ease.

As Piper raised the hatchet to sever another azalea growth spurt, a tendril whipped out and encircled her ankle. She caught a glimpse of Leo peering through the monster azalea as her feet were yanked out from under her.

"Piper!" Paige rushed over as Piper fell. She grabbed the end of the serpentine branch as it wound around Piper's leg, but she couldn't loosen it.

"It hurts," Piper gasped as the azalea tourniquet tightened.

"You're a plant!" Margaret whispered harshly at the azalea as she grabbed the hatchet from Piper's hand and cut the branch. "Start acting like it."

Paige dragged Piper away from the menacing shrub. "Are you okay?"

Nodding, Piper glanced back toward the spot where she had seen Leo. He pointed toward the house then ducked down to orb out. "I'll be right back."

The mind-your-own-business spell was broken as Piper struggled to her feet. She was still intent on seeing Leo, but not because she wanted to seduce him while Hurricane George mounted a lethal assault on the Florida forest. Leo had something important to tell her about their situation.

"The spell's broken!" Phoebe announced in a clear, strong voice.

Piper rubbed her bruised leg to get the circulation going and looked up as Sharon and Ben hurried back into the garage.

"Did it work?" Sharon asked breathlessly.

Paige shrugged. "I don't feel any different."

"Yes, it worked," Piper said, "but don't do *anything* else until I get back."

Phoebe frowned. "Aren't we in a hurry to break the spell that stalled the storm?"

"Yes, but I have to go to the bathroom first," Piper said, making the letter *L* with her thumb and index finger. She held it up until she was sure Paige and Phoebe had seen it.

"*L* for latrine?" Phoebe's eyes narrowed with confusion, then widened with understanding. "Oh, *L* for Le—"

"Bathroom," Paige said. "Got it."

"Can't you wait, Piper?" Margaret asked, hacking at the writhing azalea. She had wrapped a grungy workshop towel around the mufflers on her head and fastened it in place with rope. "This thing is growing faster than I can trim it."

The large garage door rattled and shook as something heavy rammed into it.

Ben picked up the chainsaw and looked through a two-inch wide patch of window that wasn't obscured by foliage or flowers. "The alligators are throwing themselves against the door. If they get through, they'll kill us."

"Can't we barricade the door?" Sharon asked, looking toward the cut wood piled high against the wall on the Porsche side of the garage.

"No, we can't," Paige said. "We have to keep the floor clear around the pentagram."

Piper ran out of the garage into the utility room and closed the door. Leo was waiting in the master bathroom. "What is it, Leo? The longer we wait to break the stall spell—"

Leo cut her off. "Margaret *can't* break it. She's not strong enough. I think the spell has been building up enormous energies just like the storm behind the eye. If it's become a magical pressure cooker as I suspect—"

"And the lid blows off," Piper took his line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, "we'll punch a hole in the sky."

"Something like that," Leo said.

"What should we do?" Piper asked.

"The Power of Three will give Margaret the boost she needs to break the spell," Leo explained, "but at the same time, you and your sisters have to drain the spell's excess energies to avoid the magical equivalent of a nuclear blast."

Piper frowned. "I thought using our powers was too dangerous."

"At this point not using them is more dangerous," Leo said.

Piper nodded and raced back to the garage. She didn't question Leo's theory or mull over the options. She had to trust his instincts.

"Are we ready now?" Phoebe asked when Piper returned. "Is there something else we need to know?"

Piper knew her sisters expected a few well-chosen words to clue them in about her discussion with Leo. However, there wasn't time for finesse.

"We have to use the Power of Three," she blurted out.

Paige and Phoebe stared at her.

"What's that?" Ben asked.

"Three is an extremely powerful number," Margaret said, tossing a severed branch into the rising pile. "The ancient Celts thought it had special properties."

"Exactly." Piper nodded emphatically, hoping her sisters were listening carefully and reading between the lines. "Phoebe, Paige, and I are *three* sisters. So I thought that if we added our personal energies or whatever to your personal—"

"Power," Sharon said.

"Right," Piper rambled on, holding her sisters' gazes. "*More* power might be essential to breaking the spell. It might even make it less

dangerous. I mean, if we can help Margaret concentrate."

"Great idea," Paige said, cutting in as soon as she understood. She waved everyone over to the diagram on the floor. "Ready, Margaret?"

Margaret pulled a terry-cloth hand towel off a table and stepped into the pentagram.

"You stand here, Phoebe." Paige positioned Phoebe inside one angle of the starred diagram and then pointed to the next angle over. "And you there, Piper."

Piper moved into place. She didn't argue with Paige's take-charge attitude. Her sister was on the right track, and everyone seemed willing to follow her directions.

Ben wiped sweat off his forehead and watched from the sidelines with a mixture of amused tolerance and perplexed worry. Piper realized that few of the unfolding events made sense to his analytical mind, but Ben was coping remarkably well. He must have made a conscious decision to simply accept whatever happened, whether it made sense or not.

"Okay," Paige said, "we need three long pieces of ivy to bind us together."

"I've got some over here." Sharon walked over to the potted plants that lined the back wall of the garage and returned with three lengths of vine. She handed them to Paige and went to stand beside Ben.

Paige took her place in the angle directly

opposite Piper and Phoebe. The fourth and fifth angles on either side of Paige were left empty. The three sisters held the end of a vine in each hand, forming an ivy triangle around Margaret.

Piper had no trouble keeping a straight face. The pattern, the ivy, and the theatrics were a necessary farce to mask the Charmed Ones' identity and intent. Sharon, Ben, and Margaret would have no idea that three witches were invoking the magical Power of Three to tame the storm.

"Now?" Margaret asked nervously.

"Just one more thing—" Piper glanced in turn at each of her sisters. They didn't know that the stall spell's energies had to be siphoned off. The rhyme she had ready would convey the message and give them the means. "Aren't we supposed to chant?"

Phoebe picked up the cue without hesitation. "I definitely want to chant."

"Go for it, Margaret," Paige said, with a nod for Piper to continue.

"On the Power of Three," Piper intoned, "the spell breaks easy and free . . ."

"On the Power of Three," Paige and Phoebe joined in, "the spell breaks easy and free—"

The Charmed Ones focused on Margaret as they repeated the incantation. Piper felt the power of her magical heritage course through her veins when the teacher knelt down and erased the map she had drawn within the circle.

When the map was gone, Margaret used her

finger to trace the circle and the pentagram pattern backward from how she had first drawn it. When she finished, she used the terry-cloth towel to erase the chalk circle, then the pentagram.

The instant the pattern was obliterated, the eye of the storm moved on.

Piper held her breath, waiting for a magical maelstrom that did not materialize. They were not impaled by bolts of wild magic or swept away on waves of raw power. They had successfully diffused the energies stored in Margaret's spell. But, she quickly realized, they had done nothing to diminish the natural forces that had accumulated in the back bands.

The hurricane hit hard, slamming into the house, ripping away the roof of the veranda, and knocking the garage off its cement foundation.

Piper saw Paige bolt out the side door. She had no doubt that Leo was already outside, looking for Agnes. There was nothing she could do to help them. She turned her attention to the chaos in the garage.

"Look out!" Piper yelled as three alligators squeezed under the ruined main door.

"Run!" Ben yelled. He dropped the chainsaw, grabbed Sharon's arm, and ran for the house.

Piper froze the creatures as Phoebe and Margaret ran for safety. When everyone was safely inside, she released the ornery reptiles. Mother Nature was already angry—Piper didn't

want to add frozen alligators to their list of transgressions.

Wary of whipping tails and slashing teeth, Piper dashed into the utility room. She closed the door behind her just as a large tree fell, taking the front corner of the garage down with it.

Leo was waiting for Paige by the side of the house, wet and windblown.

"Can you sense Agnes?" Paige yelled.

Leo shook his head. "No, but I might have better luck if I orb above the storm.

"Is it safe to orb?" Paige asked.

"There's no other way to get around in this!" Leo shouted to be heard above the wind and rain. "Follow the magic!" He pointed up and orbed out.

Paige pushed tangles of wet hair off her face and folded her arms over her soaking wet T-shirt. She had fled the garage without a rain slicker, but she couldn't go back for one now. A falling tree had demolished a third of the building, and a colony of alligators was moving toward the house.

"Okay, Agnes. Where are you?" Paige whispered. She turned in a circle to get her bearings, then quickly ducked back when the rental car flipped upside down in front of her.

After the small SUV slid to a stop against the wooded tree line, Paige orbed to the end of the driveway. She emerged beside an upended slab

of concrete and crouched close to it to protect herself from the biting wind. She surveyed the scene. The magic that had caused the chaos of uncontrolled plant growth had ceased, but the bizarre effects lingered. Huge boulders and other chunks of concrete littered the front yard. The massive root systems that had undermined the driveway resembled submerged land serpents.

Amazed, Paige took in the landscape through a sheet of blinding rain, trying to determine which direction Agnes had gone.

Follow the magic, Leo had said.

Her gaze was drawn to a giant toadstool growing among the forest trees. The puffy red and white plant stood firm against the ravages of the storm, marking Agnes's magical trail. Targeting an arrival point beyond the toadstool, Paige orbed into the woods. She materialized under a huge fern that offered some protection from the rain.

"Anything?" Paige asked when Leo appeared beside her.

"Nothing." Leo shivered. He was soaking wet. "Maybe Agnes hasn't been expelled from the rift yet."

"Considering the weather, that's probably a good thing," Paige said. She rubbed her arms, but she couldn't ward off the chill. She peered into the dark woods, making a conscious effort to expand her senses. But all she felt was the

misery of being caught out in a storm.

"She's out here somewhere, Paige," Leo said. "Keep looking." He vanished in a swirl of blue light, committed to the search until the woman and dog were found.

Paige desperately wanted to find Agnes and Poncho alive, but she knew that the elements might have already sealed the old woman's fate. Paige couldn't imagine how Leo handled the stress of being a Whitelighter. She and her sisters moved from one Innocent to the next, usually with breaks in between. Leo's charges depended on him for ongoing advice, strength, and stability. He was always on call, and he cared about every one of them with a totally selfless devotion. When he lost someone, he lost part of himself. Despite her Whitelighter lineage, Paige doubted she had what it took to do a Whitelighter's job.

"But you have to do it this time," Paige muttered. A tree limb broke as she stepped out from under the fern, snapping and cracking smaller branches as it fell to the ground. She barely orbed out in time to avoid being struck. When she re-materialized a few feet away, she noticed that the fern had started to shrink.

Up ahead Paige could just make out the outline of Agnes's small brick cottage. Aside from fallen tree limbs, swirling leaves, and a missing black shutter, nothing seemed amiss. A red bird feeder whipped back and forth in the wind, but

remained attached to the large oak in the old woman's backyard. It seemed as though nature had spared the property in exchange for taking Agnes hostage.

Paige glanced back toward the Grants' house, which was hidden by the woods and driving rain. She noticed that the giant red and white toadstool was gone.

There were no other spectacular growth anomalies.

Paige realized that was a blessing and a curse—there wouldn't be any odd leftover magical effects to explain, but it meant that Agnes's escape route from the rift in reality was quickly closing. The window would be sealed the instant every remnant of magic had dissipated. If Agnes and Poncho weren't ejected by then, they would be trapped with no way out.

"Agnes!" Paige yelled. She stood among the trees, drenched and battered by the wind. Her foot sank into a boggy patch, and she orbed onto slightly higher solid ground several feet away. A subtle shift in the atmosphere closed in on her, starting as a tingle that raised the hair on her arms and becoming a chill shooting through her spine. She shielded her eyes a second before a piercing white light flooded the area.

The light blazed for several seconds before it flashed off, leaving a dim green gloom. The eerie glow blanketed everything for a long moment before it faded and the full force of the hurricane

struck again. Paige heard Agnes before she saw her.

"What was that, Poncho?" The old woman's voice was strong despite a quiver of fear. Engulfed by wind and rain, she cried out in terrified alarm.

Paige orbed toward the sound. She didn't stop to think that her unique identity might be revealed. Saving Agnes was all that mattered right now.

When Paige materialized beside Agnes, the old woman was on her knees, hunched over the small poodle she had nestled under her rain gear. Her head was bent to protect Poncho and her face from the beating rain.

"Come on, Agnes. It's time to go inside," Paige said. She wrapped her arms around the shivering woman and her dog, and then orbed.

Phoebe sat on the sofa, gripping a glass of water. She stared out the front windows, watching the storm and waiting for Paige to return with Agnes. Knowing that Sharon and Margaret's mind-your-own-business spell had interfered with her Charmed priorities was no comfort. The old woman she should have protected was still outside, lost in the hurricane.

"Any sign of them?" Piper asked as she settled on the sofa beside her.

"Not yet," Phoebe said. She would not allow herself to think the worst. She set her glass on

the coffee table and glanced at the folder Ben had retrieved from the master bedroom. She hadn't opened it to check her column notes yet. She loved to write and she loved her job, but neither was as important as being a Charmed One.

"You shouldn't beat yourself up over someone else's mistake," Piper said. "We were all affected by Sharon's spell."

"I know," Phoebe said. She normally wasn't one to wallow in self-pity or self-loathing, but it was hard not to while Agnes was still missing.

"You fought back, Phoebe," Piper said. "You came through when we needed you. When *Agnes* needed you."

Phoebe wasn't ready to exonerate herself yet. Still, there was some consolation in knowing that Sharon's spell had failed to completely suppress her dedication to duty. She had fought off the catatonic effects created by the career-versus-Charmed conflict more than once to help save Agnes.

An awkward silence followed Sharon and Margaret as they came into the living room and sat down in the armchairs. Neither woman attempted to meet Phoebe's gaze. She didn't hold a grudge, but she was glad they were suffering from remorse and regret. The lessons they had learned today would stay with them for a long time.

"If anything happens to Agnes or Paige, I'll never forgive myself," Sharon finally said.

"Nothing's going to happen to them," Margaret said. Her tone was definitive, as though forcing herself to believe the words would make it so. "Agnes Finney may look like a frail old lady, but she's not. She's one tough crackerjack."

Phoebe wished she could be as positive as the irascible schoolteacher. Even the toughest old ladies could not wander about in hurricanes and survive.

"I always knew Paige was gutsy," Ben said, setting a glass of water on the mantle and stooping to poke the coals in the fireplace. A few cinders were all that remained of Sharon's magical arsenal. "But going out in a hurricane is beyond—"

"Arf!"

Everyone froze, looking at one another. "Did anyone else hear a dog?" Margaret asked.

"I heard a dog," Piper said, catching Phoebe's gaze.

Phoebe moved to the window as a yellow blaze and a gray blur streaked by. Ben had the front door open before Agnes or Paige could knock.

"We're back!" Paige said, and stepped inside with a wide grin. Her dark hair was plastered to her face, and her clothes were soaked.

"You look like a drowned rat, Paige," Phoebe said. She grabbed a blanket off the sofa and draped it over her sister's shoulders. "Thank you," she whispered in her ear.

Paige gripped Phoebe's hand and whispered

back, "That's what Charmed sisters are for."

Agnes was unaware that hours had passed or that her absence had been the focal point of the day's events.

"Well, that was certainly exciting," Agnes said. She flipped back her rain hood to reveal disheveled white hair, twinkling eyes, and rosy cheeks. Poncho's head popped out of her unsnapped slicker.

"Where the hell were you, Agnes?" Margaret asked, trying to hide her deep relief with brusque bravado.

"I thought we were lost out in the middle of nowhere," Agnes said, "but Paige found us right in the side yard."

Phoebe was fairly certain there was more to the story than that. Agnes wouldn't have gotten lost in the side yard. The old woman was either in denial or her mind had chosen to block out the memory of Paige orbing her home from the woods. That happened occasionally when circumstances were too far beyond a person's sense of reality for them to handle.

Agnes looked at Margaret. "Did you know the eye of a hurricane is whiter than a bleached sheet?"

"No, Agnes," Margaret said. "I didn't know that."

"Solid white." Agnes sighed. "I should have taken that protection thingy you offered me."

"I don't think so," Piper said.

"Sharon and I are packing in our magic-making supplies, Agnes," Margaret said, eyeing Sharon pointedly. "Isn't that so, Sharon?"

"Yes!" Sharon agreed. She glanced at Ben. "Paige tried to tell me I was playing with forces I didn't understand and couldn't control, and she was right. I had no idea Margaret and I were so powerful."

Phoebe covered her mouth to hide a smile. As long as the two women were giving up the craft, it wouldn't hurt to let them cherish their memory of magical greatness.

"Except I don't think our root-strengthening potion worked," Margaret said, frowning. "How many trees are down out there, Paige?"

"A lot," Paige said.

"What about the big oak in Agnes's backyard?" Phoebe asked. "With the red bird feeder."

"That one is still standing," Paige said.

"I'm happy to hear that. I'd miss that old tree," Agnes said as she set Poncho on the floor and shrugged out of her slicker. "Sorry about the puddle, Ben."

"Not a problem, Agnes," Ben said. He took the wet rain gear and hung it in the closet next to the front door. "I'm just glad you're back inside safe and sound."

"I wasn't going to miss all the fun," Agnes said, patting Paige's arm. "You'd better get into some dry clothes, dear. It's time for dominoes and hot tea."

"Dominoes, yes," Sharon said. "But we can't make hot tea."

"Is it too much trouble?" Agnes frowned, puzzled and disappointed.

"Actually, until the alligators vacate the garage, making hot tea is too dangerous," Ben answered.

Paige clutched the blanket tighter and murmured in Phoebe's ear. "Should Piper risk freezing the alligators long enough to liberate the gas grill?"

Phoebe looked at Agnes and grinned. "If messing with a few alligators will get Agnes a cup of hot tea, it's definitely worth the risk."

Epilogue

Paige sat on a patio chair with her face turned toward the sun. Except for the smashed garage, the missing veranda roof, the fallen trees, and piles of downed brush, no one would have guessed a major hurricane had passed through the Grants' neighborhood four days earlier.

A category four hurricane, Paige reminded herself. Following the storm's unprecedented stall, Hurricane George had been upgraded. As is often the case as hurricanes approach land, the category had gone back and forth between three and four. However, no other hurricane—of record or legend—had increased its lethal potency over land. George would join Hurricane Donna on Florida's long list of bizarre, inexplicable events.

"I know this hasn't been the vacation you had in mind, Paige," Sharon said, "but I'm really glad you came."

"Me too," Paige said. She smiled at her friend. They were enjoying a few minutes alone before

she and her sisters drove back to Orlando. "We've weathered another storm, and we're still friends."

"No thanks to me," Sharon said. She sighed. "I should have listened, but—"

"It's over. No harm done," Paige said, cutting her off. "I obviously didn't do a very good job of making my point."

"It's hard to make a point when someone can't take advice," Sharon countered.

Paige recognized the beginning of a dispute that wouldn't end and nobody could win. She decided not to play. "Let's just call it a draw and move on."

"Deal," Sharon said. Her gaze wandered across the yard to Ben, who was cutting up fallen trees with the chainsaw. "But you've got to take credit for helping Ben and me work things out."

"I'll share the credit with my sisters," Paige said.

With no electricity and not much to do except clean up the house, everyone had had a lot of time to talk in the aftermath of the storm. Without being overbearing or nosy, Piper had used amusing stories about her and Leo to help Sharon realize that no marriage was perfect. Phoebe didn't usually discuss the columns she was working on, but sharing some of her more outrageous letters had given Sharon a healthier perspective on her relationship with Ben.

Paige's work with troubled couples had made it relatively easy to peg the cause of Sharon and Ben's problem. Folk magic had given Sharon an academic and artistic satisfaction she hadn't known since leaving college. She had interpreted Ben's worry as unwarranted criticism and had resented his objections. They had talked everything through during the past few days and even made some plans for the future. Sharon was giving up magic to take up painting again—with Ben's full, enthusiastic support.

"So when's your first show?" Paige asked.

Sharon flipped open the copy of *Sunshine State Artist* lying on the table. "I can probably have several pieces ready by the time the tourists arrive in the fall. You'll have to come back. We'll do one of these sidewalk shows together."

"I'd love to," Paige said. "As long as it's not during hurricane season.

"And there it goes," Phoebe said, faxing the last handwritten page of her column to Elise at the *Bay Mirror*. The power had just come back on, and she was using the fax machine in Ben's office to send her next column to her office in San Francisco. "I never want to be without electricity again."

"I'm with you on that one," Piper said as she walked into the room. "Florida in the summer with no air-conditioning is not fun. And Leo thinks *he's* had a rough week."

Phoebe owed Leo a major favor for orbing in and staying until Agnes was found, and she quickly rose to the Whitelighter's defense.

"Leo hasn't gotten a whole night's sleep since we've been gone," Phoebe said.

Leo's troubles had not ended when the hurricane passed. Shelia and Daryl had isolated the reason for Wyatt's bad moods and crying jags. Leo had returned home to take care of a teething baby.

"That's nothing," Piper quipped. "We've been taking baths in buckets for almost a week."

"At least we had hot water," Phoebe said as she and Piper walked back to the guest room. "Thanks to Ben's gas grill."

"And my magic alligator-freezing hands," Piper said, wiggling her fingers. She sat down on the bed. "You know what's really weird?"

"Besides a hurricane on a power trip and killer azaleas?" Phoebe asked. "The fern that ate the guest room door?"

"Stuff like that happens to us all the time," Piper said. "No, what's really weird is that this was a real vacation."

"You're kidding, right?" Phoebe asked as she slipped her laptop into a canvas case and zipped it. A lot had happened since they had arrived in central Florida, but very little of it qualified as "vacation" by Phoebe's definition.

"Well, except for having to undo Sharon and Margaret's spells during the hurricane, we've

been doing the same thing everyone else in the path of the storm has been doing," Piper said thoughtfully. "We've been doing things normal people do."

"That's true," Phoebe said. "Taking bucket baths, as you just pointed out, boiling water on a gas grill for coffee, playing cutthroat dominoes with ladies who like to win at all costs, sweating profusely, listening to the radio, and reading by candlelight. But how is that a vacation?"

"I guess sometimes a vacation entails doing something you wouldn't normally do for a few days. It doesn't necessarily have to be relaxing," Piper said.

Phoebe nodded. As she thought back over the previous few days, she couldn't deny that in spite of the discomforts and inconveniences it had been a vacation on some level. "I'll give you that. But now I have to go home and recover."

"*That* sounds like a vacation to me," Piper said, breaking into a grin.

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It's tough to get good service these days—at least if you're a Charmed One. After Piper has an odd altercation with a housekeeper, Phoebe receives some strange advice from a computer technician, and Paige witnesses the questionable wilderness skills of her hiking guide all in the same day, the three sisters come to the conclusion that magic must be to blame. They soon deduce that the mythological and literary trouble-maker Puck has decided to pay them a visit. Just as they realize who is responsible for all the chaos, Puck—who is as mischievous as he is curious—appears and announces that he has devised a plan so he can see the Power of Three in action: The circus has come to town, and he knows of an Innocent in need of protection.

At the circus the three sisters must find the one in peril
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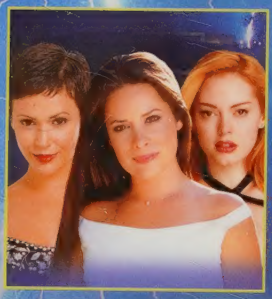

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A woman in peril, a storm prolonged—consequences of a spell gone wrong. Come together, quell the anger—unite to save a friend in danger!

Despite the fact that it's hurricane season, Phoebe, Piper, and Paige decide to take a trip to the Sunshine State. After spending a few days at Phoebe's advice column seminar in Orlando, the Charmed Ones head a few miles north to pay a visit to Sharon Grant, Paige's best friend from college. They arrive just as a hurricane in South Florida changes course and starts heading toward them.

The three sisters soon discover that the dangerous storm isn't their only worry—it seems that Sharon has taken up practicing folk magic with a quirky neighbor who has an unhealthy obsession with Florida folklore. Aware that large storms can affect magic in mysterious and catastrophic ways, the Charmed Ones must batten down the hatches and convince their hostess and her friend to stop casting spells before they find themselves trapped in the eye of a real mess.

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